

Vincent

A quantime experience



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This is a work of fiction except for the parts that aren't

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Foreword

I looked at the handsome guy opposite me. He put me in the mind of Jack Kennedy, as a young naval officer. “So, how can I help you, Mr. Goodfellow?”

“I need you to carry out an investigation for me.”

I had already figured that much seeing as I had Oswald Doyle Private Investigator painted on my door. “Okay, give me the details,” I said, reaching for pen and pad. Then he came right out with it, and you could have knocked me for six.

“I want you to investigate the death of Vincent Van Gogh.”

I almost quipped I do not do cold cases but resisted it. I needed to find out if this guy was for real. “Vincent Van Gogh the famous artist?”

“Yes,” he grinned sheepishly.

“The one who shot himself, if my basic art history serves me?”

“That is the official line - yes.”

“And that happened when?”

“July 1890.”

I tossed the pen onto the desk and sat back looking at him. “Well, unless you have access to a time machine it's going to be pretty bloody impossible.”

He laughed. “Oh no, I don't expect you to carry out an actual investigation. I need your expert advice in the discharge of a virtual one.”

I'm a pretty tolerant bloke usually and, being an ex-copper, I have met some nut jobs in my time. But this was a first. “Virtual stuff, that's got something to do with computer games, hasn't it?”

He looked at me. “I know you might think this is crazy, but all I want to do is give you the case and see what you work out. I will pay you your usual rates, and you don't even have to leave your office.”

Well, how hard could it be? And I certainly needed the readies. But first I would have to do a background check on Mr. Goodfellow. As it happened it wasn't so much how hard could it be, more a case of how weird it could be. I had no idea, when accepting this case, just where it would lead me, which turned out to be Nineteenth Century France.

Chapter 1

I came to meet Nathan Goodfellow through a series of seemingly random events. It all began with me spying on a bloke on compo. Martin Skopes didn't mean anything to me, except my being able to pay the bills for another week. I parked outside 21 Chaldon Rd, a nondescript semi-detached, three up three down and watched from my Ford Fiesta as I took photos of the man filling a wheelbarrow with sand. I was bored off my tits, but it's what I had to do to earn my fee. I certainly admired Skopes' stamina as he loaded the barrow for the twentieth time that day. Having got my photographic evidence of the man, without his back brace, I put my Canon away. Another fraud case closed, I thought, as I started up my vehicle. I had nothing personal against Martin Skopes. Down the pub, I would probably pat him on his injured back and say, “Good on you. It's about time we got something back from those thieving insurance companies.” But dobbing people in is how I make a living these days.

When after some years working there, I took the plunge and left the Metropolitan police to reinvent myself as Oswald Doyle Private Investigator; I hadn't envisaged spending my time as a detective working for big insurance companies, by spying on small-time fraudsters. But that's the current reality of my life. Now I sighed as I returned to my office to write up yet another boring report.

Back in my rented, one room and compact kitchenette - office, in East Acton, I glanced at the framed photograph on my cluttered desk. At moments like these, I wondered if I had made the right decision. Being a private investigator was not all it was cracked up to be.

Feeling somewhat melancholic, I reached for my bottle of Johnny Walker and sat staring at the image of Bill Munter and myself, taken on the day of our graduation ceremony at Hendon Police College. Having passed our exams and become fully fledged probationary members of the London constabulary Bill and I were itching to start pounding the beat. It was a very exciting time for me, with a tremendous potential for advancement. But after fifteen years in the job the gloss had somewhat dulled. Long hours, poor pay and an avalanche of red tape finally took their toll. So I

gave all that up to become a private detective. I had been a detective sergeant for five years; the job had become less appealing and promotions harder to achieve. But those weren't the main reasons I had left the force to start up on my own in civvy street. Being able to work to my schedule appealed to me most.

Pushing these nostalgic thoughts from my mind, I shuffled papers around on my desk, to reveal a folder marked 'Insurance Fraud Reports.' More bloody paperwork, I thought, as I searched for a pen. Then I changed my mind and grabbed the phone. There were one or two coppers I still connected with from time-to-time. One was my old partner, Tommy Creane, who had left a couple of messages for me to contact him for a drink. At a loose end, it seemed like a good time to take Creanie up on the pub invitation if he was free.

The Wishing Well, an enjoyable drinking hole not far from the East Acton tube, had a very pleasant garden area, which is where I found Tommy, nursing a glass. I joined him, armed with refills. I hadn't seen old Creanie - now detective sergeant Creane - since his promotion, so this was an auspicious occasion.

Creane wiped beer froth off his moustache, and asked me, "So, how's it going? I heard the divorce rate sky-rocketed since you became a sleuth."

"Cheeky bastard. I do get some unusual cases as well you know."

"Oh yeah! name one," he demanded, cockily.

I grinned, "The Royal Unity Assurance Company for one."

"What, spying on compensation cases?"

"Don't knock it. It pays the bills."

"Yeah, but does it have the thrills of Willesden Nick?" he teased, nudging me in the ribs.

"Sometimes I wish I had the security and camaraderie of the job, but other times it's good to be independent."

He swallowed a mouthful of beer. "You can't have it both ways, mate."

"I know that, but an interesting case would make all the difference."

"So what do you consider to be an interesting case?" he asked me, gathering up our glasses for another round.

I had to think about that one. When Crean got back with the drinks, I said, "In answer to your question, I guess something that posed a challenge to the old grey cells."

"What like discovering what happened to Lord Lucan?" he smirked.

"Smart arse."

"Seriously though mate I have a friend who tries solving historical mysteries. This friend's a computer programmer, and he makes computer games about unsolved murders from the past."

"And that's supposed to interest me?"

"Maybe. This nerd - Nathan is his name. With your extensive investigative skills, you can help him build a case."

"Sounds a bit wacky."

"Maybe, but I reckon you ought to talk to him. It'll be a nice simple little earner. Dr. Goodfellow,

he's called.”

I can never be sure when Tommy is winding me up. It's always a good idea to check. I looked at him. “Are you taking the piss?”

“What me, Ossie old mate?” He put on a hurt look that had often got him out of a lot of trouble, especially with women. “Look, I got talking to him while on a case. The bloke is obsessed with mysterious deaths in the past. I just thought you might be able to give him some of your Sherlock Holmes expertise.”

I was mildly interested. “Do you have a contact for the scientist?”

He jotted down some details on a beer mat. “He's a maths lecturer at the London School of Economics.” He checked his mobile contact list, then added the contact number to the other details. He handed me the beer mat. And that's how I got to meet Dr. Nathan Goodfellow.

Chapter 2

Since that first brief meeting in my office, set up by Creanie, I hadn't heard from Nathan Goodfellow for a while. I couldn't stop thinking about his crazy idea. I started imagining being in Nineteenth-Century France carrying out my investigation. Knowing what I had learned about the subject, if I took on Nathan's case, I had a virtual six months to solve an imaginary murder, if that's what it was. I must admit, in my research, I did come across some anomalies, and the people who may have wanted to harm Vincent were piling up. Fellow artists, he may have pissed off with his erratic behaviour; prostitutes who did not enjoy receiving his body; and landlords trying to protect their young daughters from being enticed by the crazy genius.

Perhaps, because it was an unusual assignment, it stuck with me, and I played with it in my mind. Theo Van Gogh, my imaginary client, Vincent's loving brother was terminally sick, but he had no idea he only had six months left to live. I had an advantage over him knowing, from history, this to be the case. So my task was to find out how his brother died, within this narrow time-frame.

I'd been intrigued by mysteries since my early childhood days. The stories in Boys Own magazine had me rapt but the intriguing subject of 'time', the biggest mystery of all, gained most of my attention. I mean we don't understand it, do we? We measure time by calendars and clocks, but I don't think that's what time is. I mean we can't see it, touch it or hear it, can we? We only know of it by us getting older. I reckon that for all our success in measuring the smallest parts of time, it remains one of the great mysteries. Now, I'm no scientist, but even I know that going back in time is considered impossible because we would have to travel faster than light, which of course can't happen. So I took Nathan's crazy idea with a pinch of salt. Who was I to question scientists about such matters?”

Since our first meeting in, what passed for, my office, I had checked out this Nathan Goodfellow. It turned out he was a maths lecturer at the LSE. His Linked-in profile showed his discipline to be in complex numbers math, a subject that would leave most people preferring to watch the wet paint dry on a park bench. His youthful, Jack Kennedy type visage, in his profile photo, made him look more like a male model than a numbers cruncher. He didn't fit the usual mould of balding, chain-smoking bores with chalk dust all over their tweed jackets. But, apparently, Nathan, like most anally retentive mathematicians, found algorithms to be intriguing, and he spent most of his working day delving into the unpredictable or is it predictable, properties of what he called fractal logic. So why was the mathematician interested in the death of a nineteenth-century artist? Oh well, it takes all sorts, I thought, mentally shrugging my shoulders. And the case would be a nice little earner for a very short effort.

Then I received Nathan's eMail. It contained various links to websites concerned with the life and death of Vincent Van Gogh. I was more interested in all things about his death. These sites all

seemed to say the same thing. All but one. This one, which stood out from the others looked promising. It put forward an argument that the mad artistic genius didn't take his life.

I conveyed as much in my eMail reply. Nathan didn't eMail me back – he phoned, and put forward his game concept, which posed the question, did Vincent kill himself or was he murdered? The official line, history tells us, is he had taken his life while in an inescapable depression. It certainly seemed to be the case. But, in his computer game idea, Vincent's brother wasn't convinced. He ardently believed foul play was involved.

Buoyed, Nathan hired the game's detective character, to be modelled on yours truly, to find out if it was murder and, if so, who had committed this terrible crime? We arranged to meet in a pub, near the LSE to discuss this.

Drury Lane, which led to the university, in its modern incarnation was a far cry from its early design. Back in the Nineteenth Century, it was one of London's worst slums. You wouldn't think so now, though, what with the significant developments that have taken place. Kingsway and Aldwych now reflect the affluence and style of patrons of the Royal Theatre, the Lane's most famous landmark.

As I alighted from the cab in front of the Coach and Horses, in Wellington Street, I readied myself for another encounter with Nathan. The pub, a four storey building, squeezed between two others, seemed typical of many of the City's taverns, noisy and crowded. Nathan was seated back in a corner, away from the live music. I jostled my way past drinkers, to join him. I sat down. “Okay, I'm here. Hit me with it.”

“It gets very busy in here around this time, so I took the initiative to get you a beer,” Nathan said, grinning widely.

I certainly wasn't looking forward to fighting my way to the bar. “That's great. Now why are we here?”

“I felt we had to meet again in person. I don't know why but I keep thinking about this case, and I wonder if we have missed something.”

I took a swig from the pint mug. “You mean have I missed something.” I fixed him with my gaze. “Nathan, save your dough. I can't find anything to suggest any foul play.”

He looked downhearted. “I know we lack something. What about the missing gun?”

“That can be explained any number of ways.”

“What about his dying words to his brother?”

“With his state of mind, it could have been nonsense.”

He took a sip of beer. “Wouldn't it be amazing if we could witness what happened?”

Jesus, now he was getting into wishes. “Let it drop and save your money. That's my professional advice to you.”

“Okay Mr. Doyle, I bow to your greater wisdom in this matter. But if I come up with any evidence suggesting murder, will you help me?”

As I was pretty sure he was pissing against a hurricane, I said, “Sure, if it's solid.”

Chapter 3

A few days later, an excited Nathan rang me again, saying he had made a breakthrough in the Van Gogh case. He wouldn't tell me what it was on the phone, so we arranged to meet at the Coach and

Horses, for a lunchtime drink. I decided to give him one more chance before I wiped the Van Gogh thing. To tell the truth, I don't know why I did this. I guess some part of me was still intrigued with the idea of a virtual case. I had never been a fan of computer games but being a consultant for a gamer held some interest for me.

Nathan flashed a dazzling smile as I approached him. "Thanks for seeing me. You won't regret this."

"This had better be good, Nathan."

I took a sip of the beer he had thoughtfully provided. "So what have you discovered about the case?"

He looked sheepish. "Well, it's not exactly directly related. But it could act as an asset in solving it."

"Oh, and what asset are we talking about?"

"I am thinking of making a virtual time machine so that my digital hero can go back in time and witness what happened."

"And this is helpful because ..?"

I could tell from his hesitation he struggled mentally to find the words that would stop me from getting up and walking out.

He said, "What I am about to tell you is crazy, so I will treat it as being hypothetical."

Intrigued, I responded, "Okay."

Nathan leaned closer to me. "Supposing we were no longer talking about a computer game. What if there was a way for you to speak with witnesses who have been long dead, would you be interested in investigating such a case?"

I frowned disconcerted. "Oh hell, you're not on about time travel again."

"No, this is something different."

"Nathan, I'm becoming concerned about you."

"This is just a hypothetical so try and go with it."

"Okay."

"Supposing I knew a brilliant person, a scientific genius who has perfected teleporting. And supposing this genius could teleport you back in time so that you can talk with people associated with the famous artist."

I wanted to leave right then, but something intangible kept me on my seat. "I might be interested."

Nathan rose to leave, "Great." He handed me a card. "Meet me here tonight at 7 pm."

I smiled, "What, a hypothetical one?"

"No Oswald, a real one."

Chapter 4

"I may have found someone," Nathan said, as he and Jennifer Smethurst drank Earl Grey tea at his apartment in St John's Avenue, Putney.

"Found someone for what?" Jennifer queried, her suspicion showing.

“Your particular project. The one you won't tell anyone about, even me,” Nathan teased.

“I've told you,” she answered, flicking back her shoulder-length blond hair, wishing she'd worn it in her usual ponytail.

“A little bit. Just enough to frustrate me. When are you going to let me see what you have been up to in your 'secret' lab?”

She smiled, saying nothing. When she smiled like that, Nathan melted, but he tried not to show it. He did not want his true feelings for her to spoil their long-time friendship. The scientist had long held a candle for Jennifer but had always managed to keep his love for her for his heart only. Smitten by her intelligent Jennifer Saunders looks, he desperately wanted to take their relationship to another level. But science seemed to be her only real love, and her obsession with her secret project left no room for emotional commitments.

“Who is this someone then?” she asked, sipping her tea.

“He's an ex-cop turned private investigator. He is interested in working with me on my time-detective game. And he is coming to see you tonight.”

Jennifer went stiff as a board. “Tonight! At my place! How dare you invite him without asking me first?”

Nathan reached out to her. “I'm sorry, but I was losing him. I just thought you might like to check him out. You know.”

“An ex-cop for God's sake! What on earth were you thinking, or not thinking.”

Nathan blazed, “Dammit Jen, you said yourself that you couldn't take your project any further without a human subject. Come on girl, take a chance otherwise you are never going to get it beyond your virtual world.”

She mollified a little. “The same goes for your game, Nathan.”

He smiled, “Exactly! Together we can both advance our ideas.”

She grinned, “I guess I'm scared to see if it 'will' work.”

He patted her arm. “You and me both babe.”

Chapter 5

Jennifer Smethurst had kept her project secret for years. Even Nathan, her closest friend, and confidant had no idea what she was doing in her 'off limits' lab. Her invention, which had the potential for wide-ranging repercussions, especially if it fell into the wrong hands, defied conventional physics. She kept it secret for two main reasons. She did not want to be exploited by unscrupulous users, and she was concerned that the government might confiscate it before she had the chance to see what it could do. She knew her breakthrough was fantastic and unbelievable, and she was bursting to tell someone about it. After years of very private research and development, her baby was ready to show its paces. Now was the time for her first live test.

She breathlessly produced her key and unlocked the door. It always gave her a thrill when she entered her special room. Inside stood her secret project in all its awesome glory.

The six monitors displayed all kinds of scientific data, gobbledegook to anybody less intelligent than her. The device in the centre of the room was utterly brilliant and unlimited in its potential. All the simulated computer tests were now working fine. After a bit of final tweaking, Jennifer was ready to go. This experiment was her first live trial. She retrieved a white mouse from a cage, attached a tiny video/audio recording device and placed the rodent in a transparent box in the centre

of her invention, which resembled a giant pumpkin with copper coils running around it. Professor Smethurst next disconnected the cables that joined it to the bank of computers. For the first time, it had to fly solo. She checked the onboard power supply, and everything was reading Okay. Next, she keyed in a date from five years prior. All she had to do now was program the 'auto-return' control and press the power button.

Her hand stretched out tentatively, and she prayed as it made contact with the red button. The device made a whirring sound as it powered up. There was some crackling as energy surged through the copper coils surrounding the machine. Once the power was high enough Jennifer's pride and joy, her particle assimilator, began to function. At first, nothing happened. Then, suddenly the mouse and cage were no longer there. The pumpkin was empty. Thirty seconds later mouse, and box reappeared. The experiment was a success.

Jennifer checked the mouse. It appeared disoriented but other than that completely unharmed. She then checked the recorder. There was only static and some blurred images. She looked at the small rodent, saying, "I wish you could tell me what you went through on your adventure." The mouse had quantum-travelled somewhere five years earlier, but as the recording idea had failed, she had no way of knowing what it had experienced. "If only you could communicate with me," she said to the mouse, as it sat in its cage, preening its whiskers.

Now that the mouse had returned unharmed, Jennifer needed to carry out one final test - on a human subject. But, apart from her project being illegal, who would be foolhardy enough to test-pilot it?

Chapter 6

The journey to the mysterious scientist's home didn't take long. Just forty minutes after leaving North London I arrived at the farmhouse in Bushey.

Upon my knock on the solid oak front door, Nathan answered and invited me inside. As we walked to the lounge, in the old rustic dwelling, Nathan said, "I wasn't sure I had you hooked enough to get you out here."

"I nearly changed my mind, but the old curiosity got the better of me."

"I don't think you'll be disappointed," he said, grinning

Just then, a mature full-figured, attractive, 40s something woman, with light Blond hair tied in a ponytail entered the room. Wearing slacks and a sloppy Joe, she was rugged up against the evening chill. Proffering her hand, she said, "You must be the detective Nathan has told me about."

"Oswald Doyle," I said taking the hand of this beautiful woman.

"Professor Jennifer Smethurst," she said, smiling warmly. "Please make yourself comfortable."

Comfortable was one thing I was not feeling. I had no idea what I was doing there.

Nathan, cosying up to the professor, was sending visual signals. Hands off, she's mine kind of silent messages. "Jennifer is an absolute genius, as you will soon find out," he gushed.

I detected her blushing slightly. Breaking the ice, I said, "So Jennifer, tell me what this about the reason for this meeting. Nathan was very cryptic."

"All in due course Mr. Doyle. But we need to get better acquainted first."

Jennifer provided us with a body nourishing, hot vegetable soup flavoured with sour cream and chilli. We sat in her kitchen and ate, while she regaled us with amusing anecdotes about campus life from her university days. She told us her story about how she was sidelined as a lecturer in quantum

physics, because of her views, concerning infinity and negentropy – negative entropy - were considered heresy by the old brigade, who still upheld the Einstein view on thermodynamics as being gospel. I'd encountered such dinosaurs in the police service - people afraid to step beyond the parameters of the accepted curriculum of their lives.

Nathan and I were deep in conversation when Jennifer turned up with the coffee. As she placed the hot steaming mugs in front of us, she said, "Now that we have eaten and got to know each other a little, we come to the real point of this gathering."

Nathan said, "You mean the serious side of this evening."

"What's the serious side?" I said, apprehensively.

"I have told Jennifer about the virtual case," Nathan mentioned. "So she knows where we are coming from."

I responded, "Speak for yourself, Nathan. I have no idea where I am coming from."

"Let me explain," Jennifer suggested, to nods of approval. "I used to work in quantum research at the University of Bristol, where I became intrigued with the idea of time travel. I may have got the bug from seeing 'H G Wells' time machine movie at the local cinema when I was a little girl. I read anything I could get my hands on about time travel. I even constructed small make-pretend time machines for my dolls. Well, the bug stayed with me, to the point of it becoming an obsession. So I studied at uni, where I achieved a doctorate in theoretical physics. I carried out my initial experiments at night, in the uni science lab."

"And did you manage to build your time machine?" I enquired, cynically.

"No, but I had a breakthrough while there. It occurred to me the reason why we can't perfect time travel."

"Wow! Why is that?" I asked, becoming more interested.

"Because it was space travel I was trying to perfect, not time travel."

"Space travel! That's not exactly new, is it?"

She focussed on me. "Oswald, what I realised was that we have it the wrong way round. NASA and other space agencies around the world are engaged in time travel, not space travel."

"How so?" I asked, with raised eyebrows.

"It's quite simple. Time travel is about moving in time, which means it takes time to time travel. Whereas space travel is about moving in space, which means it takes space to space travel."

I squinted at her. "That seems to be very basic logic. But where does it take us?"

"Yes, it is. Now, the way I see it is that space travel has a huge advantage over time travel. Time travel takes remove space time and space, whereas space travel needs no time."

"Now I am very confused," I stated, wondering what the hell she meant.

"Please bear with me and it will become clearer. We think time travel takes no time. But if that were so it would be called 'no-time travel,' not 'time travel'. Time travel is about moving from one space to another in time. But Space travel is about exchanging one space for another. Time does not come into it. In fact, it would be correct to call it 'space trade' as no actual travel is involved. For example, Nathan tells me you want to journey back in time to investigate the death of Vincent Van Gogh. To do so, you have to give up this space to exist in another one."

I turned to Nathan. "You are making things up. I never said any such thing."

“You agreed, hypothetically,” he argued.

“Yes. But I gather we are not talking hypothetically here,” I said, glancing at Jennifer. Then I asked, “Do you mean this is possible?”

She smiled and got up. “Why don’t you two follow me. I have something to show you.”

We both followed her out of the kitchen.

She turned abruptly. “However, before I show you what I have been working on I must swear both of you to secrecy. Do you understand?”

We nodded in affirmation, and as Jennifer led us to another part of her sprawling old farmhouse, my mind was reeling wildly, imagining all kinds of Jules Verne type scenarios. Mental imagery mixed with some quirky Dr. Who memories and a tinge of HG Wells, all vied for pole position in my head.

Chapter 7

It was to be a special moment for Jennifer. From what she said this was the first time anybody had been allowed to see what she had invented. Nathan acted like a kid in a toy shop. Her whatever-it-was obviously meant a great deal to him, as it did her, from what I could gather. For me, at this stage, it was little more than a curiosity. Although Jennifer seemed to be swelling with pride, I could still sense her anxiety. I guess this was her big moment and nothing must go wrong.

What I knew about quantum science you could write on a matchbox, but I had heard it was an unpredictable beast. Jennifer’s hand shook as she inserted the key into the lock. I guess she might have felt that we were violating her sacred space. To lighten the moment, I said, “Come on, the suspense is killing me.”

For Jennifer, there was no turning back. She hesitated at the door, then faced Nathan. “Deep down I know you’re right. It’s time I showed this to somebody if only to verify its existence.” Then she unlocked the door, and we followed her into her special room. She and switched on the lights. “Okay, this is my ‘Quantime.’”

Sometimes it pays not to do reality checks. Sure, most of the time it pays to be real, and it may have been a good idea to have gone outside to see if things were normal, because they certainly weren’t from where I was standing. Here I was, in a room with a crazy woman who thought she could travel in time – correction, space – and her faithful friend who believed in her, without question.

It didn’t look anything like a blue police box or something that resembled Wells’ contraption with its big dish at the back. “What’s a Quantime?” I asked.

“It’s the name I give my teleporting device,” Jennifer proudly announced.

“Are you saying you are teleporting things in that?” I asked, doubtfully, looking at something resembling a pumpkin on steroids.

“Let me show you something,” Jennifer said.

“Sure,” Nathan agreed.

He hung onto her every word. He’s got it bad, I thought.

“Now I want you to be quiet and still - no questions or comments until I say. Is that agreed?”

We both agreed and watched as Jennifer’s little drama unfolded. She picked up a mouse cage complete with mouse and placed it in the pumpkin shaped ‘Quantime’. She then pressed some numbers on a keypad and switched on the machine. Next, she explained, it was programmed for

'auto return' mode. However, that was supposed to work.

I watched intently as the copper coil gave off arcing tendrils of blue light. Then I could not believe my eyes. The mouse and cage had completely vanished. The device was empty. I almost exclaimed my surprise but forced myself to remain silent. I blinked twice, but the Quantime was empty. Then it wasn't! Miraculously, the mouse was back in the cage in the middle of the weird device. I wondered if I had been subject to some auto-suggestion. Had what I thought I saw happened?

"How the hell did you do that?" I expounded.

Jennifer smiled broadly. "Not a bad party trick, huh."

"Seriously, though, how does it work?" Nathan asked, wide-eyed.

"Do you want the long or short version?"

"The simplest one," I suggested.

Jennifer became serious. "Okay, everything that exists is made of atoms and the space around them, which according to quantum physics can either act like waves or particles. Now waveform reality cannot be pinned down, because as soon as you think you have a handle on it, it's something else. Particles are easier to pin down because they make up all 'stuff' and stuff has a particular form, which, apart from its entropy effect, does not change." she checked with us. "Are you with me so far?"

"I'm following you," I said.

"Good. Now, with the Quantime the two things occur simultaneously. I put stuff into it and the low-frequency charge and some other things I won't go into right now, turn stuff into waves, which is why you can no longer see them. The mouse did not disappear. It changed from form to formlessness."

Science was never my strong suit, but the weird quantum thing intrigued me. "So the mouse and cage were always there but in a form we could not recognise," I suggested, trying to get a handle on the quantum process.

Jennifer gave a knowing smile. "Well yes and no, Oswald. It didn't just involve a wave/particle exchange; it included a space/time exchange as well. So as a wave/particle exchange it was always there. But as space/time sharing, it disappeared."

This explanation shot over my head and hit the upper stratosphere. I asked, "But how could it be there and not be there at the same time?"

She answered, "Because the low frequency is running through the copper coil, and other things create a quantized field inside the device. Then the Quantime can separate time and space and then reunite them as space/time."

"Phew! It's way beyond my comprehension," I stated, slowly shaking my head in wonderment.

"And this is the simple version?" Nathan added.

I had a question. Well, I had a whole bunch of queries, but one squeezed itself to the front of the queue. "Hang on a minute, Jennifer. How do you know space/time exchange took place? I mean it could have just been a wave/particle exchange. Don't get me wrong, though; that's unusual enough in itself."

"Because I keyed in date and time and latitude and longitude co-ordinates to cause the space/time exchange."

“But how do you know it worked. Were you able to collect verifying data from the past?” Nathan asked.

Jennifer looked at him. “No. And you are correct Nathan. The mouse couldn’t tell me where it went, so I’m only left with computer data. What I now need is a person who is willing to try out the Quantime themselves. But where am I going to get anybody foolhardy enough to put it to the test?”

There was a deathly hush in the lab.

Eventually, I spoke up. “Let me get this straight; you want someone to volunteer to have their atoms messed with while being separated from space/time.”

“That’s one way of explaining it,” Jennifer grinned.

“Well good luck with that one professor,” I said.

“I’m sure it’s perfectly safe. After all, it didn’t harm the mouse,” Nathan Justified.

“I’m a man, not a mouse,” I quipped.

Jennifer remained silent.

“If it’s so safe why haven’t you tried it out, Jennifer?” I asked.

“Because somebody has to be at the control centre to respond if something goes wrong. And I am the only person who knows how to work this thing.”

I ventured, “I don’t know much about atoms, so what do you reckon is the worst thing that can happen with this machine if it all goes pear-shaped?”

Jennifer threw her arms wide, answering, “Nobody has any idea. Personally, I think it is safe, but until we test my particle assimilator with a human, we won’t know.”

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” Nathan beamed. “Get someone who is doing life in prison to try it out.”

“I can see some pretty big holes in that idea,” I countered. “First, you’ve got to convince the Home Office you’re not mad. Secondly, prisoners who get given life sentences aren’t usually nice people to know.”

Jennifer sighed, “I guess I’m going to have to wait until the Japanese come up with a robot capable of recording official data.”

Nathan looked at me. “You want to find out what happened to Van Gogh. Just imagine how it would be if you could carry out an investigation in real time.”

The thought of having my atoms altered to provide me with an entirely different reality did not exactly appeal. “Thanks but no thanks. I’m happy with my atoms just as they are.”

Ignoring my complaint, Jennifer said, “I don’t think it is a good idea to change anything in the past that will impact on its future.”

“So, even if Oswald discovers that someone murdered Vincent we cannot publicise it?” Nathan queried.

I threw my arms up, exasperated. “You guys are not listening. You are not going to get me in that thing!”

Chapter 8

I sat staring at my untidy desk, as though my concentration might summon up some desk-tidy fairy.

But there was another reason my clutter fixated me. After my bizarre experience at Jennifer's, the night before, I needed to focus on anything that kept my feet firmly on the ground. I looked at a file on a lost greyhound, a job I had been putting off. Things were getting bad when all my detective skills were being used to find a lost pooch. If ever the boys at the Willesden Nick got to hear of it I would never be able to live it down. But even dog hunting was preferable to thinking about space-cadet Ville and disappearing/appearing mice. My logical brain told me it had all had all been an illusion. That unknown to me Jennifer had popped some funny mushrooms into the veggie soup. After all, physics laws cannot be violated and disappearing and appearing mice did just that.

So I sifted through my inbox papers to find the information on the dog. Just then my phone rang. It was Nathan Goodfellow. I didn't want to talk to him. He was part of the illusion, not the reality. "Hey Nathan, can I ring you later?"

"There's no need, Ossie. I just wanted to tell you to drop the case."

"Drop the case. But I thought..."

"... I've decided to do it."

"Do what?"

"Take a ride back in time."

"No shit!"

"Yes."

"But."

"It's okay; I shouldn't have dragged you into this. It is my project and my responsibility. So thanks for your help and send me you consulting fee."

I couldn't believe it. Something in me said it's not fair. I'm the detective, not him! My artistic brain, sensing the missed adventure of a lifetime, felt a loss. "We need to talk about this."

"Why? I've made up my mind. I am going for a ride in the past."

No this wasn't right. Besides, I wanted to get to know the beautiful, brilliant, crazy Jennifer some more. "Can we meet at the Coach and Horses to discuss this further, Nathan?"

"Sure if you want. You can give me some detective tips."

As I replaced the receiver, I felt a hollowness in my stomach. Even my logical brain reacted because, although I'd persuaded myself that Dr. Smethurst had pulled some clever illusionist trick, Nathan's verbal bombshell had shocked it out of its complacency. Then, joined by my ego, which couldn't stand missing the chance - possibly its only chance, of fame and fortune. Even though I was still scared as hell of having my atoms tampered with but I still had to dissuade Nathan somehow from taking the plunge into the unknown.

With the lost greyhound once more forgotten, I met Nathan at the chosen pub. He was jittery with nervous anticipation. As we sat with our beers, I said, "Why on Earth are you willing to risk your life with Jennifer's toy?"

Concerned that there might be eavesdroppers around, Nathan leaned in closer. "Because, I need to find out what happened."

"You could be committing your very own brand of suicide."

"Ossie, I just don't get it. You hardly know me, so why are you showing so much concern for my safety?"

I couldn't answer because I didn't know why. Of course, My ego knew, but I wasn't about to admit I was jealous, yet afraid to do it myself.

"The mouse was okay, wasn't it?" Nathan reasoned.

"Yes, but as I pointed out to Jennifer we're not mice."

"But we're made of the same stuff – atoms."

"I know that, but you still don't know how it is going to affect the mouse in the long term."

Nathan fixed me in his stare. "Somebody has got to do this. So, if not you, it has to be me."

"I've been thinking about that."

"And."

"I don't know Nathan. I'm confused after last night."

"Okay, I'll lay it on the line. Are you willing to continue with the case by going back in time?"

"Christ man, I don't know. I want to, but the prospect terrifies me!" I finally admitted.

"This is your last chance, Oswald. If you vacillate now, I am walking out that door and getting into that machine."

Desperately wanting some excitement in my humdrum life, yet unwilling to risk everything for fame and fortune, I found myself stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place. It's not going to work, my logical brain screamed. Do it, my ego yelled. My reptilian brain screamed, you'll probably get killed! It'll be the greatest of adventures my artistic centre encouraged. Taking a deep breath, I exhorted, "Fuck it! I'll do it."

Chapter 9

To prepare me for her human experiment Jennifer wanted me close by, albeit in her spare bedroom on an inflatable camp bed. I tossed and turned all night. Having made the most important decision in my life to date, I felt like a new man. And I certainly will be once my atoms get all shook up. The prospect of getting in that space machine scared the hell out of me, but I'd committed myself, so there was no turning back. Like Neil Armstrong, the first known man to set foot on the moon, my time had come to make a mark in the history books. Sure, there are those alternative thinkers who think the moon landing was a giant hoax and those who believe other beings got to the moon first. But I am one of the majorities who believe Neil did go where no man had gone before. However, he at least had all his atoms in the right order and behaving themselves. Mine, well God knows what would happen to them, and by extension, me. Those immortal words 'a small step for man but a huge step for humanity' sprung to mind. But this wasn't NASA, and my Quantime experience wasn't going to be a globally televised event. My foray into the unknown is to be a covert operation, hidden from the eyes of the world. Then the impact of what I was doing hit me full force, with a cold shiver. If it all went pear-shaped and I didn't get back, nobody would ever know. I will have disappeared without a trace. I will become an enigma like Lord Lucan. Except, as I'm not as famous, an unknown mystery. But If I succeed and live to tell the tale, now that would be a different story. The world would know, and I'd receive acclamation as a hero, a world celebrity. I basked in this fantasy as I finally drifted off to sleep.

I awoke, bleary-eyed to the sound of Jennifer Smethurst entering my room, with a mug of steaming tea. She smiled, "Oswald, I have made my decision. Nathan has persuaded me you are our best choice for the job."

"How many applicants have you got?" I asked cynically, dragging myself into sitting position.

Sitting down on the bed, she grinned, “Nathan and yourself. And, as Nathan points out, you are the one with the detective skills.”

“That's if I survive and get the chance to use them.”

Ignoring my comment, she said, “Do you want to do it, or not?”

I grinned “Well, I don't like to leave a case unfinished,” unless it a lost dog, I thought.

“Okay. Now there are certain ground rules.”

“Which are?”

“No matter what happens you are not to change anything in the past.”

“Right,” I answered glibly, with no idea of what I had agreed to.

She added, “You are not to bring anything from the past into the present. And you are not to leave anything from the present in the past. So you must bring everything back you take with you. In short, there must be no incoherent ripples left in space-time. Are you clear on this?”

“Yes,” I answered, though having no idea of the enormity to which she referred.

“I cannot stress enough that you are not to leave anything from the present in the past.”

“Okay, Jennifer, I get it.”

“Other than that you will be freer than any other human being on this planet.”

“There's something that's been playing on my mind.”

“What's that?”

I looked at her. The bags under her eyes showed she hadn't slept well either. Dreading the answer, I asked the question. “Jennifer, can I die or be harmed in the past?”

“Yes, of course. Quantime travel doesn't make you immortal. So you'll have to keep your wits about you.”

“But if I'd died in a previous time I wouldn't be here now. And if I'm not here now, this never happened. And if this never happened...”

“... Yes, I get it, Oswald,” Jennifer said, “You couldn't have died in the past. Yes, it's one huge paradox. And this experiment will, hopefully, finally, help to explain it.”

She looked at me. “Do you have any other pressing questions?”

I had a thousand questions but opted for one at present. “If I die in a previous time I will be left in the past. And, if so, won't that go against the rules?”

“I was referring more to technological questions.”

“But if I don't return won't the machine be left in the past?”

Jennifer smiled knowingly. “My Quantime is a quantum device. As such it is a virtual one, that only exists in its function. In other words, when not used it doesn't exist as any physical entity.”

“So it wouldn't affect the past!”

“Oswald, there are many Questions for which we don't yet have answers. However, where the Quantime is concerned, I can control its auto-return programme from here. So I suggest, if you ever find yourself in trouble, get the Quantime to you immediately.”

“Get it to me! Don't you mean...?”

“...I will explain that.”

“Will it be visible and if so will other people also see it?”

“I don't know for sure. Although because the Quantime will always be right here, any remote version will be a holographic reflection united to this machine by way of Quantum entanglement.”

“What's that?”

“Don't worry about that, Oswald. The important thing is you will be able to see the Quantime, or your version of it because it's entangled with you. Other people probably won't, because they are not.”

“Okay Jennifer, how do I locate the Quantime when I need it?”

She handed him a pendant with an inset crystal, to hang around his neck.

“What's this, a lucky charm?” he quipped.

“No,” she smiled, “You could say it's a kind of remote control. It is the most important thing you will have with you. You'll be stranded in history without it in history with no means of returning to this our present time. I couldn't give you anything modern as it has to fit in with any time in the past. Pendants and Talismans have been significant for thousands of years. You just have to press lightly on the crystal, and the Quantime replicate will appear.”

“Really!”

“Yes, Oswald.”

“You seemed to have thought of everything, Jennifer,” I said with the greatest admiration for this brilliant lady.

“I hope so,” she replied. Then she said, “Oswald, are you ready to be the first human to experience space travel, for real?”

Taking a deep breath, I said: “Just about as ready as I will ever be.”

I felt very nervy as I sat in the strange machine. It seemed as though I was sitting inside a huge, hollowed-out pumpkin. Despite all the high-tech stuff it seemed very basic inside. With no seat harness, no controls and no special space suit for me to wear, I felt very vulnerable. In fact, it seemed more like some bizarre medical x-ray machine than a space-time device, or more correctly a space exchange device.

Nathan had come for the launch if you could call it that. I looked out and saw him staring at me, a deep frown lining his face. Then I heard a voice. It must have been Jennifer's. It said, “Now, breathe deeply and relax.” Some chance of that, I thought as my ears became filled with a whirring sound. My hands white-knuckled gripped the sides of my seat. I sat ramrod rigid with my teeth firmly clenched, my last thought, in this current reality, being, ‘What the fuck have I done?’

Chapter 10

Strangely, there was no sense of motion in any direction. I didn't even know if I had moved anywhere at all. So smooth was the transition I could have been sitting in my Acton office. I was unaware of my location or the time. Still seated in the pumpkin, which meant I was conscious and alive, nothing much else seemed to matter. My atoms appear to be arranged in a way still recognisable to me. Although, even with a tunnelling microscope, I doubt I could recognise one.

I sat there wondering what to do next. I felt comfortable, and I didn't want to venture into the big bad world, especially one I didn't recognise. But I couldn't just sit there all day. Taking a deep breath, I tentatively stepped out of the bizarre orange device, which, to my great surprise and consternation, immediately disappeared. I provided an update of my surroundings. The heat I felt on my face strongly suggested I had arrived in the summertime. I was thankful for the boater, which protected my head from the sun's rays. Wait a minute! I didn't own such a hat! I checked the rest of my attire and was astounded to discover I was wearing suitable clothing for the period. My short jacket seemed tight and buttoned, which I later found was fashionable at the time in France. I looked around to get my bearings. A flaking road sign was still readable enough to show I wasn't far from a place called Auvers-sur-Oise. How amazing! The very place I needed to be to start my investigation. I took a long, deep breath and gingerly stepped forward, taking my first steps on French soil.

Having walked to Auvers-sur-Oise, a sleepy little town on the banks of the Oise, in France, I was on full alert, my senses overloaded by the sights, sounds and smells of the French community. A discarded newspaper showed the year to be 1890, indicating I was not only in the right place but also in the correct year.

My research had told me Vincent van Gogh died in July 1890. This community, in the North West Suburbs of Paris, became associated with several famous artists, including the subject of my mission. Among its many tourist attractions, in its future, this town, the home of the Museum of Absinthe, would trade, to great effect, on its connection with two famous people, Vincent Van Gogh and Dr. Paul Gachet.

Absinthe, the main thing Auvers is known for, proved the cause of the downfall of many artists. This alluring drink, a chemically sweetened liquor, often bright green, was served with a carafe of water, to dilute it. It supposedly helped artists with their inspiration, although it seemed more likely to rot their brains. Anyone foolhardy enough to take it straight, to experience its hallucinogenic effect, could be said to grab a proverbial tiger by its tail. Neither action would be a very smart move.

I needed directions to the Hotel Ravoux, where Vincent had recently died, and, found to my amazement that I spoke perfect French - another astounding thing about the Quantime experience. As the date was July 29th, I knew from my research into Vincent's life, Theo van Gogh, his beloved brother, would be in town. I recognised him as he sat at a wooden table by himself, nursing a drink. I approached and asked him, "May I join you, Monsieur." He looked like his brother, except his hair and beard were dark.

He looked up at me, grief showing in his tired eyes. "I fear I will not be good company."

"You mourn the death of your brother."

He looked straight at me. "Yes, but how do you know about that?"

"I have come here to find you, Monsieur."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Oswald Doyle, at your service."

"You are English?"

"Irish by birth. It's about you brother that I am here."

Theo looked grey and sad, "Vincent! I don't understand. I have only this morning come from my beloved brother's deathbed. So what do you want?"

"Do you think he killed himself?"

He stared at me, “Are you a newspaper reporter?”

“No Monsieur, I am a detective.”

“Doctor Gachet wrote to me saying Vincent was getting better and was painting again. I came here to see him and learned, to my horror, I discovered he'd been fatally shot.”

“By his hand?”

“That's what the gendarmes say?”

“But you don't believe them?”

“Like I said Vincent seemed much happier. So why would he take his life?”

I decided to take the plunge. “Would you like me to investigate for you?”

Theo smiled weakly, “Very much. I don't know who you are, but you are an angel been at this difficult time.”

I'd never been referred to as an angel before. “I need to know everything you know about this tragedy.”

“Monsieur Doyle, I am going to order lunch. Would you care to join me?”

We sat outside the café, in a ragged little patch of shade. Theo ordered coffee and croissants for us.

“Monsieur Van Gogh, let me offer my sincerest condolences on your loss. Your brother is a great artist.”

“Thank you for that. Although the best thing you can do for me is to find out exactly how Vincent died.”

He looked unwell and coughed a lot during the interview. Wiping his nose, he looked across the wooden table at me. “Monsieur Doyle, I desperately need to know the cause of my brother's death. I am not a wealthy man, but I will pay you what you ask.”

I hadn't thought about the fee. But I would need some local currency to live. “Pay me what you think is fair.”

He reached into his pocket and withdrew some notes, saying, “Here are 50 francs to help you get started.” As he handed it to me, he said, “Please make this job a priority. I do not have much time.”

“Time for what?” I asked, feigning surprise.

“Monsieur Doyle, I have major health problems myself and may not be around much longer. It is my fervent wish that I find out how my brother died before I make my exit from this life.”

We were interrupted by Arthur Ravoux, the café owner, who placed dishes of strong coffee in front of us. Recognising Theo, he said, “My condolences on your loss, Monsieur.”

“Thank you, Arthur. Vincent always spoke well of you and your good wife.” Then, turning back to me, he said, “I am the first to recognise that my brother, not the most stable of people, did unusual things, but I don't believe he shot himself.”

Taking a bite of hot, buttered croissant, I asked, “What makes you think he didn't shoot himself?”

He stared at me for a moment, suppressing a cough. “If you were suicidal would you shoot yourself in the chest or the head?”

Theo had put me on the spot. Although using a firearm to commit suicide is one of the most reliable

methods, it is certainly not fail-safe, as in Vincent's case. Vincent suffered a chest shot, which, although not immediately fatal, did kill him. I answered, "If using a handgun, I believe it is more normal to fire in the mouth or under the chin."

"Precisely. So why would my brother not try to kill himself that way?"

I shrugged, "I cannot answer that."

Monsieur Doyle, "They say he tried to shoot himself in the heart and missed. As a result, he died an agonising death, in my arms."

I was dealing with a grieving brother, and his bias clearly showed. I had to be objective. "Do you know his state of mind just before he allegedly killed himself?"

"With me living in Paris and him at the Saint-Remy institution, it is impossible for me to gauge that. As I mentioned, he was feeling better and ventured into the fields to paint. But to get a more detailed assessment, you will have to ask his physician, Dr. Gachet."

"Yes, I intend to. Vincent wrote to you regularly, did he not?"

"Yes, but I last received a letter from him on the eighth of May last year."

"And you haven't been in touch since?"

"Only through the institution. They kept me informed, but not regularly."

I tasted the strong coffee; it's powerful aroma exciting my taste and smell. "As you are closer to your brother than anyone, do you know if he had any enemies that would want to do him harm?"

He coughed, wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, then said, "I have been thinking about that. I know he had a falling out with Paul Gauguin, another artist, but I hardly think..."

"...Did he owe anybody money?"

"Only me, as far as I know. But I never expected my brother to be able to pay me back." Theo sipped his coffee, wiped his mouth and said. "Will you take on this job?"

I threw my hands up "We have no suspects, no motive, and no weapon. That does not leave us much to go on."

Disappointment showed on Theo's face. He sighed and slumped in his chair. "Perhaps if I show you the place where he got shot?"

It's always useful to see where a crime takes place. The locus in quo we call it - the location of the body. "Who found Vincent?"

He spread his arms in a gesture of unknowing. "I'm told he somehow got himself back here, to his lodgings. But with a severe chest wound that is highly unlikely, I would have thought."

My interest piqued a little. "Who told you this?"

"Adeline Ravoux, Arthur's daughter, but she is just thirteen years old. And her parents won't let me speak to her about it anymore."

"Has anyone confirmed her story?"

"Yes, Dr. Gachet, who dressed the wound."

"Then I must speak with him," I said enthusiastically.

"He will be attending Vincent's funeral."

“It will be useful for me to attend if that's all right with you.”

“The sooner this is put to rest the better, Monsieur Doyle. So yes, You may attend.”

Chapter 11

Not many people attended the funeral of Vincent van Gogh. Even so, we crowded the small hotel room as we looked at the body of the artist. Vincent was looking so peaceful I could feel calm about him. I felt like a bit of an interloper being there among his friends and loved ones. Theo had introduced me as an English investigator, leaving many of the mourners suspicious of me.

Theo had set out a beautiful tableau, with Vincent lying in his simple coffin, surrounded by his last canvases, which included masses of yellow flowers: dahlias, daffodils, and sunflowers. His easel, folding stool, and brushes stood before the casket. Among those present in Vincent's bedroom were, I discovered, the painters Lucien Pissarro and Auguste Lauzet. Being fellow artists they knew what it was like to be misunderstood and had come to pay their respects.

The coffin carried to the hearse at three o'clock that afternoon, was horse-driven to the cemetery. We all followed it on foot, trudging up the dusty hill outside Auvers, in the heat of the mid-afternoon. As I reached the top of the hill, I could see and hear the crows cawing in the wheat fields.

Theo and some of the mourners were sobbing pitifully, as the misunderstood artistic genius' casket got lowered into the grave. The little cemetery with new tombstones now had another one added, in memory of the artist. There he rested in peace on a small hill, above his beloved wheat fields, now ripe for harvest.

Dr. Gachet, a well-dressed man in his fifties, with a curled up moustache, trying to suppress his tears, said, “We honour and admire Vincent, an honest man and a great artist - who had only two aims and loves in life, art, and humanity.”

I found it heartening that so many people turned out to say goodbye to this much loved and much-misunderstood man. A man totally drove by and dedicated to his art.

Later, at Café de la Gare, the wake's location, I managed to single out Dr. Gachet, a red-headed man, like the deceased. Wearing the same white hat he had worn when he posed for Vincent, he put on a brave face. “Dr. Gachet, I liked what you said at the graveside.”

He looked at me, weighing me up in his mind. “I don't think I know you, Monsieur.”

I proffered my hand. “Oswald Doyle. I believe you knew Vincent very well.”

He seemed guarded, unsure how to respond. I needed to get past his Gallic mental armour. “Theo doesn't believe that Vincent shot himself. What do you think?”

He folded his arms and scowled. “Theo happened to be Vincent's lifeline and supporter. He loves his brother. So it's only natural that his feelings are somewhat confused at this time.”

“He seems very rational to me, and I'm convinced that foul play caused Vincent's death.”

He looked at me quizzically. “What's your interest in Vincent's death, Monsieur?”

I declined a pastry from a passing tray. “Theo has engaged me to investigate the circumstances of this tragic event.”

“Monsieur Doyle, I implore you not to fuel Theo's irrational feelings at this time.”

“Doctor, surely, looking into this is the perfect way to allay his suspicions.” I watched the doctor stroke his moustache thoughtfully. Then I said, “I believe you talked with Adeline Ravoux about the events of the night Vincent returned, grievously wounded, to his lodgings.”

“As his physician, I asked her what had happened.”

“It seems her parents are very protective of her, which is how it should be. The problem is they won't let her speak to anybody about it.”

“Which, as you just said, is also how it should be.” After a moment's moustache twirling, he said, “And you want me to tell you what she said.”

“That would be most helpful – yes.”

I watched the doctor gently tug again on his moustache as he thought about it. At length, he said, “Adeline Ravoux, took me into her confidence. She told me that on 27th July, Vincent left the inn after breakfast and had not returned by dusk. He, being a creature of habit, this concerned her father and mother, who wondered what could have happened to delay him.”

“He is a grown man. Why would this have been of concern?”

“In many respects, Vincent seemed like a child, very sensitive and insecure. Apparently, he got back to the inn around nine pm, holding his stomach. She said her mother had asked him if he had a problem. Monsieur Van Gogh started to answer, with difficulty. “No, but I have ...”

“... Have what?”

“He didn't say.” Paul Gachet continued, “With some apparent difficulty he climbed the stairs to his room. Later, her father, hearing groans coming from the artist's room, found the painter curled up in bed. He asked if he felt ill, Van Gogh then showed him a bullet wound near his heart, explaining he had tried to kill himself.”

“If he was well enough to walk back to Auvers-sur-Oise why did he not finish the act?”

“The distance measured only around one kilometre. Vincent walked long distances while carrying his equipment. During his stay in London, he used to walk from Brixton to Covent Garden - a journey that only took him 45 minutes.”

“I see. Still, Vincent wasn't fatally wounded then.”

Always physically robust and a ridiculously fast walker even injured such a short walk would not have given Vincent much trouble. Did you know he once walked over 100 miles in 3 days, from London to Ramsgate, where his sister lived. His worn out shoes were a symbol of his stamina for which he found it appropriate to pay them his respects by painting them.”

“Nevertheless, doctor, it does not explain why he did not finish himself off.”

The doctor smiled thinly, “I guess we will never know the answer to that, Monsieur.”

“Yes, but it does give pause for thought.”

“Indeed it does. Perhaps the pain he suffered clouded his judgement.” He shrugged, “But no matter how much we conjecture about this we will never know what went on in his troubled mind.”

“If he experienced such pain why did he not seek help as soon as he returned to his lodgings?”

Gachet shrugged again. “As I have said, how can we know what goes on in the mind of a sick man?”

I had the feeling something was missing, a piece of the jigsaw that could make sense of all this.

“Did Vincent tell Monsieur Ravoux anything about what happened after he shot himself?”

“He informed me that Vincent confessed to shooting himself with a revolver and passed out. Later, revived by the coolness of the evening air, he had tried in vain to find the gun to complete the act.

He could not find it and so decided to return to the inn.”

This piece of information surprised me. “The artist couldn't locate the gun! Why would that be do you think?”

“I have no idea.” Then he suggested, “I suppose somebody could have taken it while Vincent lay unconscious.”

It seemed a feasible answer to me. “It's possible, I guess. But why would the boys not try to get Vincent help?” Before he answered, I added, “Unless of course the person who retrieved the gun if Vincent had one, had shot him.”

“Preposterous!”

“Maybe, doctor. But still a possibility.”

“It doesn't add up with what Monsieur Ravoux told me that Vincent said to him, during his last two days on earth.”

I didn't know if it would help but I said, “Theo offered to take me to the place where Vincent allegedly shot himself but I would rather you show me?”

“Certainly Monsieur. But I can't see how it will help.”

I had arranged to meet the doctor at the 'locus in quo' the next day. With no other immediate leads to follow, I was at a loose end and decided to relax a while. For the first time since landing that day, or more precisely, since finding myself in France, I felt pangs of homesickness. Or is that space-time sickness - if such a thing is possible. And, as I was currently experiencing the impossible, according to standard physics, it seemed that just about anything could happen.

Then I had a radical thought. Nothing was stopping me from going back to my space-time for a bit of R and R. Especially as I could come back in no time at all. All I had to do, according to Jennifer, was press the unique pendant that hung around my neck and, 'Whammo' I would be back in my usual time reality. I hadn't so far put this theory to the test, so now seemed as good a time as any to test it.

Chapter 12

I brimmed with elation. Oswald Doyle had made history without history knowing it. It seemed an odd concept but was the best explanation my brain could muster. It left me with somewhat of a conundrum, one I would have to put to Jennifer once I had returned to my normal space-time. Namely, that past events were complete and frozen in time. So how could unfreezing those events, to incorporate new data be possible without affecting the previous data? It seemed the same as saving a file on a computer and then opening it to add more information and then saving it again. At the point of closing the file two choices are offered, save changes or discard changes. I wondered if that opportunity existed where Quantime Space travel is concerned. Could I delete experiential details before closing the file on the Vincent mystery?

The place I chose for my experiment seemed deserted. I had no idea if anyone else would see the 'Quantime' if I summoned it. Maybe these Nineteenth Century French minds couldn't interpret the Pumpkin-like thing if it suddenly appeared before them, like a wheel-less Cinderella carriage. But who knows? I also wondered if activating the Quantime in auto-return mode would automatically discard any changes I may have made to that place and time.

Puzzled, I pressed the crystal on the pendant hanging around my neck, and the Quantime magically appeared. I had expected it to happen but, even so, it's instant manifestation, before my eyes, left me totally stunned. So much so that it that my rational mind took a moment before my legs received

instructions to step into the device. Somehow they did, leaving me no longer in Nineteenth-Century France.

Chapter 13

Consciousness tried pushing through a veil of sleep, as my brain made an attempt at assimilating the data it had experienced. For me, the Quantime, no longer a pumpkin in my mind, felt more like a womb - one I found myself reluctant to leave. I felt strangely safe in there, but everything outside seemed alien to me - the world I knew but couldn't recognise. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Willing myself to move, I stepped out of the Quantime, feeling like a baby taking its first steps. The nervous strain had taken its toll on me, and I needed to sit down. The fact that was wearing my everyday modern clothes and my digital wrist watch, which displayed the current date, strongly suggested I had arrived back in my own time. It wasn't possible for me to describe how I felt. It seemed as though my state of mind resembled something between a wave and particle reality. The walls and other stuff looked solid enough, but I felt as though I could pass through them, like some ghost. However, My rational brain, trying desperately to make sense of the situation, delved into my memory files to extract all the relevant data that would fix me solidly in the present time. As I became more oriented to my current situation, my sensory perception took effect, and I felt more ready to face the world.

Jennifer, apparently awaiting my arrival, with nail-biting tension, seemed overjoyed to see me safe and sound. "It works! It works!" she exploded, enveloping me in a fierce hug.

Extricating myself from her fervent but welcome embrace, I stepped back, with a huge grin on my mug, "I'm here, so I guess it does." I then added, "If I had known how surprised you would be that it worked I wouldn't have volunteered in the first place."

Jennifer laughed, "I feared that would be the case, which is why I didn't tell you." Then, taking my arm, she said, "Now sit down and tell me all about it."

"Not before you get me a big mug of strong coffee."

As she went to the kitchen, she said, "Phone Nathan, he will want to hear this."

As we - the only three people in the world to know of the Quantime - sat drinking coffee in Jennifer's lounge room, the questions began. Professor Smethurst recorded every word.

She asked, "How did it feel? Did you speak with Theo van Gogh?"

"One question at a time please," I pleaded, still a bit wobbly from the space travel."

So Jennifer asked. "What did it feel like to be in another space-time reality?"

"It didn't feel like that. I mean, sure I experienced a different reality in a different time, but it seemed very natural. My clothes fitted in, and I found myself speaking fluent French. The funniest thing though is that, while there, I could still mentally connect to this time."

Jennifer feverishly jotted down notes. Then she looked up from the screen. "Have you any comprehension of the immensity of the experience you have just had, Oswald?"

Nathan, brimming with admiration, said, "Jennifer, have you any idea of the incredible technological breakthrough you have achieved?"

She corrected him. "Compliments can come later. For now, we are still carrying out experiments, with Oswald's help."

I thought about what she had said. It seemed too vast to comprehend in a rational light. So I said, "And the next part is to send me back tomorrow. There's unfinished business I need to attend to."

Nathan beamed. "So how goes the case?"

"Well, I think the official history book story has bits missing, but I haven't been able to prove it yet."

"What's missing?" Nathan asked.

"The gun Vincent allegedly shot himself with, for starters. On the day that he got shot, he gained consciousness and looked for the gun to finish himself off. But he couldn't find it. And it's never been found."

"So someone must have removed it," Nathan said.

This line of questioning is all very well" Jennifer said, "but I'm more interested in you, Oswald. Did the Quantime cause any side effects in you, pains, cramps, nausea, that sort of thing?"

She and Nathan were on two different planets, where their questions were concerned. As her questions were about me, I responded to her line of inquiry. "No, I didn't feel or experience any uncomfortable side effects. It amazes me how smooth and straightforward the whole thing turned out to be. But the bizarre aspect is I had the weird feeling that it wasn't my first Quantime experience, yet it felt like it."

"Hm, that's interesting," she commented. "Did it seem like a kind of Deja-vu?"

"Not exactly, because I could recall some details of a previous trip. It felt like my first time in the Quantime."

She made a note. Then she smiled, "It's probably just your mind trying to adjust to the particle assimilation process. I'll look into it."

"Yeah, I guess that's it," I replied. "But I would like to be more oriented to my assimilated surroundings."

"Sure," she agreed. Then she asked, "How fast did the Q' - that's how we will refer to the Quantime for security reasons - manifest once you pressed the crystal?"

"Instantly. And it appeared in an entirely different location to where I had left it."

Jennifer laughed. "The Q doesn't exist anywhere as a physical entity, except when you summon it."

"But that just doesn't make any sense. I pressed the crystal, and it appeared. So it had to exist somewhere."

Jennifer smiled winsomely. It seemed like trying to explain advanced Quantum science to a Neanderthal with a mechanical mind. But he was doing his best with what his mind would allow. "Okay Oswald, when you become mindful of the Q and press the crystal it connects your vibrational frequency with that of Q so that it can be seen and used by you."

It still didn't make a lot of sense, but I liked her smile.

Later that evening as I helped Jennifer prepare coffee, I told her I preferred to be called Ossie. Nathan, was out to the world, resting in the lounge in front of a wood fire that burned heartily in the grate. With Nathan asleep, it gave me a chance to spend personal time with Jennifer. As I poured the milk, I said, "You know that rule about not changing anything in the past. Well, supposing I'm somewhere back in history, and I get killed, Right?"

"Yes," Jennifer responded. "We've been there before."

“I know, but if I died back then, I couldn't get back to this present. Not only that, I wouldn't have been in the present in the first place, because I would not have been born.”

“Where are you going with this, Ossie?” she sighed.

“I don't know. It's just that I like knowing the answers, and it's still an unanswered conundrum. I mean if I hadn't been born I couldn't have gone back into the past to be killed. So where does that leave me?”

Jennifer laughed, “I don't think I'm up to dealing with complex paradoxes at present. All I can offer is that in the quantum state all is potential. It's in this possible state of being that the Q resides. Once you summon it, the device takes on its memorised particle reality form.” She added. But let's not labour that point too much. All you need to remember is if there is any threatening situation that you find yourself in, rub the crystal immediately. Once you are in the pod, you are perfectly safe. Do you understand?”

“Yes, but you haven't answered my question.”

She looked at me and grinned. “Here's one for you. I just explained it to you correctly, but you didn't see the connection, which goes to show you are not ready for the answer you seek.”

I grinned. There was nothing I could think of to say in response.

As we drank coffee, Nathan, now awake, said, “So, do you reckon he meant to kill himself?”

“From witness statements, it seems that Vincent, a very troubled soul, had severe psychological problems and fits. However, just before his death, he allegedly reported feeling better, and his wheat field paintings were full of passion.”

“But that proves nothing,” Jennifer commented.

“True,” I replied. “but as he hadn't killed himself when in deep depression and having psychotic episodes two years before, I cannot see why he would want to end his life when he was feeling better.”

Nathan replied, “Well Ossie, I'm no shrink, but sometimes it seems the darkness affects us more when we are in the light. It's the contrast between the two that emphasises one or the other.”

“That's very profound, Dr Freud.” Jennifer laughed.

Nathan, unamused, smiled wanly.

Chapter 14

We stood in the wheat field, on a warm but breezy day, the ears of corn whispering to each other. The quietness, interspersed with the cawing of crows that stood out starkly against the golden grain, gave me an odd feeling. I held up the unfinished painting, Vincent's last artwork, while Dr Gachet slowly moved around, trying to find the spot where Vincent had set up his easel.

Within a few minutes, he said, “I think this is it. There are indentations in the soil, and he leant down to pick up something, “...a discarded paint tube.”

“Give it to me,” I said excitedly. I flattened out the crumpled tube.

Yellow oxide, one of Vincent's favourite colours.” Paul explained.

“What made him so passionate about yellow?”

Dr Gachet looked at me. “Some people blame it on glaucoma, a disease that damages the optical nerve to blindness. But Vincent drank an enormous amount of strong bitter coffee, which may well

have significantly enhanced his perception of colours, resulting in this very vibrant yellow hue.”

“Coffee can do that?”

“Yes, Monsieur. And such a stanza fits Vincent's obsession with sunflowers. He walked to the sunflower fields, picked up several of them, carried them back to the yellow house and painted them until they wilted. He created his sunflowers to welcome his friend, Paul Gauguin, who came to live with him. His intention, although noble, produced strange behaviour. When expecting guests, people usually put flowers in their rooms. So imagine how Gauguin felt when he entered the small room from the yellow house and saw all that yellow almost screaming at him.”

“I imagine it could have been quite a shock.” Then I suddenly noticed a patch of reddish brown on a nearby rock. I crouched for a closer look. “This could be blood,” I pointed out.

Paul looked at it. “It could just as easily be dry paint.”

He could have been right. We would probably never know, with forensics in the 1800's being pretty much non-existent. I scraped the rock with my penknife and folded the shaving into a handkerchief, my thought being that Jennifer would be able to find from whence it came. Of course, the rule about not bringing anything from the past applied here. But I didn't figure a tiny bit of whatever-it-was would make much of a difference to the warp of space-time.

Dr Gachet looked at me quizzically but said nothing about my behaviour. He said, “It could be blood, I suppose but even if it is what does it prove?”

Gachet did not look well, but he put on a brave face. He compared the painting with the view. “This certainly seems like the place he created his final work of art.”

I turned to the doctor. “Would you say that you were his closest friend since he moved to Auvers?”

“We had more than a usual doctor-patient relationship. I medically cared for Van Gogh during the final months of his life. In return, he painted my portrait, back in June.”

Google had made me aware of the two pictures executed around the same time. Both showed Paul Gachet sitting at a table leaning his head on his right arm. But they differentiated in colour and style. I wondered what he would think if I told him the first version fetched a record price of \$82.5 million, in 1990, plus a 10 percent buyer's commission when sold at an art auction in New York. “How did you find his state of mind during those last weeks, doctor?”

Gachet shrugged. “How can we know another's state of mind? The best I can offer is that he seemed more settled after I secured him a room at Saint Remy. He certainly seemed focused enough to continue to paint, and he became obsessed with his wheat field studies.”

“Do you have any thoughts about that?”

Gachet shivered as a freak gust rushed through the waving crop. “He seemed to be more stable. But who knows what went on with him?”

I nodded, not sure of the relevance of his response. I wasn't even sure why we were standing in the desolate field where Vincent had allegedly tried to end his life. “Theo told me that Vincent stayed with you and your family.”

“Yes, but that occurred earlier this year. Theo searched for a home for his brother, after Vincent's release from the asylum at Saint-Rémy. Upon the recommendation of Lucienne Pissarro, a former patient of mine, I said I could help him out.”

“Pissarro volunteered you.”

“Artists tend to support each other. Pissarro told Theo about my interest in working with artists. So

Theo sent Vincent to my second home in Auvers.”

I nodded. “Theo also said that Vincent had an unfavourable first impression of you. Did you know that the artist wrote a letter to his brother, remarking that he thought he could not count on you because he reckoned you were sicker than he.? He considered you akin to a blind man leading another blind man. And he feared that you both might fall into a ditch.”

Gachet gritted his teeth, suppressing annoyance. “Of course, I am aware of that, Monsieur. Are you also mindful of the fact that in a letter just two days later, to their sister Wilhelmina, he relayed that he had found a real friend in me, someone like another brother? He made a point of saying, so much do we resemble each other physically and also mentally.”

“His mood seemed very changeable then?”

“Of course.” Gachet looked annoyed. “Why do you ask me these Questions?”

“I want to get to know Van Gogh, to get a picture of the man.”

He stared at me. “Nobody got to know Vincent. You are wasting yours and my time.”

Noting his irritation, I conceded, “Very well Monsieur, let us return to Auvers.”

Auvers-sur-Oise, a small village just north of Paris, appeared very picturesque. As I walked to a church, along narrow dirt roads around the village, I heard accordion music played in the distance. Accompanying bird song blended with the scent of the flowers. As I walked into the church, I passed a man playing his guitar, as he sat on one of the timber chairs outside.

I could certainly understand how the eternal village would attract artists like Van Gogh and Pissaro. Daubigny is known for being the first artist to reside in Auvers, where he painted many scenes from a boat.

To get a better sense of this quaint place I walked along the river from Auvers toward Pontoise. I saw some views which figured in the paintings of Camille Pissarro. His name reminded me to make a note to contact his son, Lucienne.

The weather began to turn chilly. So, being dressed for a warm day, I headed to the Hotel Ravoux, located in Place de la Mairie, where the great artist spent his last days.

I sat down at a vacant table, where an adolescent girl, whom I took to be Adeline, served me with coffee and croissants. I asked casually if this were the place Vincent had stayed.

She looked at me with innocence in her eyes and smiled, “Yes, Monsieur he also passed away here.”

“Did you speak with him at all, while he stayed here?” I asked, suspecting the ice to be thin beneath my feet, but testing it anyhow.”

She hesitated, looking about, “Sometimes but he came over as a very private man.”

“Did he speak with you when he returned here that night, in pain?”

She looked around nervously, as though someone watched her. “I have to go Monsieur, enjoy your coffee.”

I would have to work on my technique with Nineteenth-Century female adolescents. I sighed, biting into my delicious croissant. Just then I was confronted by a largish man wearing an apron, whom I discovered was Arthur Ravoux. He strolled heavily up to my table. “Monsieur please eat and leave and do not come back.”

His abrupt manner attracted the attention of his other patrons. I guessed his attitude concerned me

speaking with Adeline. "Monsieur, why are you taking this line with me?"

"Because I don't want the likes of you bothering my daughter and causing trouble."

He looked overpowering as he loomed above me. I stood to face him man to man. "Monsieur, it is not my intention to cause you or your family any trouble. I am merely inquiring about what happened between you and Van Gogh the night he came back here, wounded."

The fierce scowl on his face and clenched fists with white knuckles told me he would be no help at this time. I drained my cup, turned away and said "Good day to you Monsieur." It wasn't going to be easy, but I would have to speak with him again.

Chapter 15

As I walked around the village, I couldn't help but feel I wasn't the reason for Ravoux's angst. Something else had to explain his rude, belligerent behaviour. He seemed excessively protective towards his daughter while letting her serve strangers. I caught myself conjecturing, and realised I had to remain objective. With this thought in mind, it also occurred to me that this whole mission could be a wild goose chase.

There seemed to be conflicting stories. While this is not at all unusual, as witnesses only have their perceptions of events, I sensed there were things not being said. Monsieur Ravoux did protest too much, as though he may have had something to hide. Of course, he could just be concerned about publicity that could damage his business, but I was becoming suspicious of his motives. I also needed to talk with other people who knew Vincent during the artist's last months. Lucienne Pissaro and Paul Gauguin came to mind. From my limited understanding of modern art history, I knew that Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin were considered to be two of the greatest painters of the late 19th century. A brief but intense collaboration between the two artists, engineered by Theo, with his brother's best interests in mind, didn't help. If my memory served me correctly, they had met in Arles in the autumn of 1887. Each man had tried to learn from the other and had admired the other's work. Their collaboration, marked at first by mutual support and dialogue, became competitive leading to friction that ruined the best friendship Vincent had experienced in France.

From what I had read about him, Paul Gauguin seemed to be an opportunist. Upon arriving from the exotic islands shown in his art, he had had no money. He had met Theo who had paid him to work with his brother. The men differed sharply in their views on Art: Gauguin favoured working from memory and allowing abstract mental processes to shape his images, while Vincent held an unshakeable reverence for the physical reality of the observable world of models and Nature. These styles reflect the very different techniques each artist used.

However, the series of violent incidents, around Christmas Eve 1888 mostly interested me, regarding motive. Paul Gauguin seemed a possible suspect for Vincent's murder. I held that view until his alibi, about being in Breton at the time of the shooting, was confirmed. Even so, he could have been behind it, but got somebody else to carry out the act. I didn't think it likely though and soon figured there wasn't any value in following that trail. I needed to speak with Theo again.

Chapter 16

I remembered Jennifer's comment about the enormity of my involvement in her project. I was also aware that my successful mission wasn't going to be a globally televised event. It seemed exactly the opposite - a covert operation, hidden from the eyes of the world. I knew if this Q travel did go horribly wrong I would have disappeared without a trace.

I recalled that bizarre experience as I waited for Theo to turn up at his brother's graveside, where we had arranged to meet. Vincent's small headstone, standing up against a wall in the Auvers cemetery, seemed somehow insubstantial, but in a way it reflected his life. Theo, running late, appeared

somewhat puffed, having climbed the hill behind Notre Dame D'Auvers.

“My apologies Monsieur Doyle. I hope you don't mind meeting here, but I wanted to visit Vincent one more time before I take the train back to Paris.”

He didn't look at all well but put on a brave grey face. He groaned as he crouched to place some fresh Dahlias against the headstone.

“What do you know about Paul Gachet?” I asked.

“He proved very supportive of my brother. He is an art aficionado, you know. He even dabbles in painting, himself. But why do you ask?”

“He escorted me to the locus in quo, at my request. But he seemed distracted and wanted to get away. Any idea why he would act like that?”

“He also is not a healthy man. He was much more than Vincent's physician. He was a good friend to my brother. Although he tries to be stoic about it, it could be too much for him to cope with.”

His thinking seemed logical to me. “Yes, that could be it. Although he does think I'm wasting my time.”

Theo looked at me with glistening eyes, “And what do you say, Monsieur Doyle?”

I shrugged, indicating I had not decided. “On the face of it, the most likely scenario is that your brother shot himself. After all, he seemed quite unbalanced in his mind. Then there is the letter he sent to you, the last one you received from him, I believe.”

Theo recalled it in his mind. Dated July 10, Vincent wrote;

I think that we must not count on Dr Gachet at all. First of all, he is sicker than I am, I think, or shall we say just as much, so that's that... I don't know what to say. Certainly, my last attack, which was terrible, was in large measure due to the influence of the other patients.

Later in the letter he added:

For myself, I can only say at the moment that I think we all need rest — I feel exhausted. (In an even more despairing tone he added), and the prospect grows darker, I see no happy future at all. At length, he sighed, “Yes, on the face of it the official story holds up. So why am I still harbouring doubts? I feel that my dear brother is not at rest, and his spirit shall remain restless until I know what happened, whatever that may be. So thank you for your honesty.”

“Having said that, the thing that keeps nagging at my mind is that the pistol remained unfound. Of course, it's possible that somebody could have happened to your unconscious brother, saw the gun and stolen it.”

Theo's face became a question mark. “Is that what you think?”

I turned to face the grieving brother. “I am also interested in how, with a severe chest wound, he managed to walk back to Auberge Ravoux, unaided.”

“Are you suggesting something is being covered up by Arthur Ravoux?”

“I am not suggesting anything at this stage of the investigation. I'm keeping an open mind. But the hotelier does seem to be very defensive when the subject comes up.”

Theo brightened. “Then you are going to pursue this further.”

I nodded, “I don't like loose ends. I want to speak with Monsieur Ravoux, but he is too aggressive.

don't think he will be open to talking with me again.”

“He is just protecting his daughter,” Theo said.

“From whom?” Then I said, “Didn't Vincent use her as a model?”

“Yes, he did paint Adeline. Why?”

“He and she were alone in his room!”

Theo's brow creased knitted. “Yes, but what are you inferring?”

“I find it odd that Ravoux would let an artist spend time with his adolescent daughter alone. When did he start being so protective, I wonder?”

“I know nothing about that,” Theo said, brusquely. He remained quiet for a moment, then added. “There is something else that may have some bearing on the case.”

“What's that?”

“Something my brother said, as he died in my arms. He uttered “Do not accuse anyone... it is I who wanted to kill myself.”

“He said those exact words.”

“They were his last words, Monsieur Doyle.”

“What do you take that to mean?” I pressed.

He stared at me. “Isn't it obvious. He wanted to kill himself, but He got somebody else to shoot him.”

It wasn't a bad theory, but it still had holes. “Why hadn't the perpetrator made sure he had killed Vincent? Surely leaving a wounded man would be dangerous for him.”

“Yes, I must admit that has me puzzled.”

A fresh wind built up, rustling the leaves of trees bordering the cemetery; it began to rain. Just spots at first, then heavier drops. I pulled up my collar to ward off the chilly breeze. “Have you any idea as to whom your brother didn't want to have accused?”

He frowned, “No Monsieur”. He looked at his watch. “Now I must be going.”

“Before you go, Monsieur Van Gogh. whom did your brother associate with mostly during those last months?”

He shrugged, “Apart from Paul Gachet and Arthur Ravoux I am not sure. Oh, there is the Roulin Family. Joseph, in particular, He is a mail carrier in Arles. He could be worth talking to.”

“Didn't Joseph sit for Vincent?”

“Yes, he did - last year.”

I shook hands with Theo, a much-preferred salutation than kissing cheeks the Gallic way. Deep pain lay behind his eyes. I wanted to do the best I could for the man, at least so he could have closure.

The Quantime, despite being an incredible machine, still had problems. The main one for me being that whenever I summoned it the Q' immediately whisked me back to my present lifetime. I would like to have been taken straight to Arles, in the South of France, but to do so, I first had to go back to Jennifer's. I determined to talk to her about this inconvenience.

Chapter 17

Having arrived safely back in my time, I had many questions to ask Jennifer, but she wasn't at home. At first, I thought it inconsiderate of her. Then I realised she had no idea when I would return there. My experience left me exhausted so I slept on Jennifer's sofa, and was still in the land of nod when she returned, laden with groceries. I woke up as she packed things away. "Hi, Jennifer. I hope you don't mind me sleeping on your sofa."

She sat beside me. "So how did it go?"

"Me or the case?"

"Both, I guess,"

"I've got to go to Arles. To see a mail carrier."

"So why are you here?" she asked.

"Because the Q brought me back here. Isn't there some way I can programme it to ..."

Cutting him off, Jennifer said, "... No. If I hadn't set it, to auto return God knows where you would end up. Besides, this is a controlled experiment, which means I control it."

"I understand that, but it is a bit of a nuisance."

"Couldn't you catch a train or something?"

"What! When I have the Q?"

I slept on the sofa that night, in readiness for my adventure the next day.

The next morning, having boarded the Q once more I found myself in Nineteenth-Century Arles. As I stepped from the Q' in a secluded copse, the summer sun's rays filtered down through the oak tree branches, affording a degree of shade. Wildflowers were in bloom and birds chattered away in the trees. It was a hot summer's day, and I felt the impact of the sun's rays while walking along the dusty road just north of Arles. Luckily I was wearing a wide-brimmed boater. It amazed me how my wardrobe automatically turned out to be appropriate, not just for the period I found myself in, but for the weather of the day.

To get a sense of the place, I visited various sites where Vincent had painted. This interest occupied me for a couple of hours as I looked out for scenes Vincent used for his 'Night Over the Rhone' and 'Café Terrace on the Place du Forum', in Arles, at Night. However, I had to get back to my primary task, that of speaking with Joseph Roulin. I figured that as Vincent's postman and close friend he may well know some intimate things about the artist's time in Arles. I knew that Vincent van Gogh had arrived there in February 1888 and remained there until May 1889. So, did something happen during that year that could have contributed or even led to his death? To all intents and purposes, his domicile there turned out to be his most productive painting period, which suggests his depressions would not have been too bad. Arles appeared a beautiful town, and I could see why Vincent would have loved the place, with its busy, vibrant market square, that inspired the artist to paint his night café scenes.

Parched and thirsty I sat down to drink coffee at the Place du Forum, where Vincent painted his Cafe at Night masterpiece. A few of the locals were sitting around, smoking pipes and playing dominoes. I approached an elderly gentleman, whose bushy salt and pepper beard almost obscured his mouth. He sat reading a newspaper when I approached. "Excuse me Monsieur I am looking for Joseph Roulin, the postman."

His rheumy eyes peered at me through coke bottle lenses. "Who are you?" he asked suspiciously,

giving nothing away.

“You have heard of Vincent, the artist?”

“Of course Monsieur. Why do you ask?”

“I am writing about him. Apparently, Joseph knew him well, so I have come here to talk with him.”

It must have sounded plausible because the old gent pointed to a pair of men huddled over a dominoes game, at the end table.

As I approached, a tall man with a fanned-out beard looked up.

“Monsieur Roulin?”

“Yes. How can I help you, Monsieur?”

“I want to learn about Vincent, the artist. I believe you two were friends.”

He grinned and rose from his seat. “I used to be his mail carrier. We spoke together – yes.”

“Is there somewhere we can talk privately?” I asked, seeing the dark look on his opponent's face.

He looked at me quizzically, “And what is your interest Monsieur?”

“I am working for his brother Theo. He suggested that you may have some information that will help us build the picture of events leading up to Vincent's death.”

He excused himself from the game and took me aside. He said, “I have some deliveries to make. Meet me in two hours and I will take you on a tour of the village.”

“Where?”

“The hospital.”

I caught up with Joseph at the end of his round. He had just been delivering mail to the hospital.

“Hi, Monsieur Roulin. Are you free now?”

He propped his bike up against a tree and checked his fob watch. Then he said, “Come and I will show you what he painted. I think this is the best way to get to know the artist.”

We walked and talked as he showed the staircase of the Trinquetaille Bridge and the docks Vincent used for his 'Starry Night over the Rhone'.

As we stood looking over the waterfront, Joseph said, “Vincent always thought of stars fondly.”

This era, being a time of gas lights and candles, lighting left much to be desired. It was not very bright, and battery powered torches didn't yet exist. So I asked, “How did the artist have enough light to paint at night?”

“He told me he created enough light to paint by putting candles in his straw hat.”

“It must have been difficult for him.”

Joseph said, “His whole life seemed to be difficult. His second study proved easier for him. He painted his second 'starry night' during the time he spent in the hospital in Saint-Remy.”

“Yet he wrote about it in a letter to his brother. He wrote: Death is like a journey to the stars; to die peacefully is like going there on foot.”

“Yes, he showed it to me. I considered him a strange, extraordinary man.”

Joseph showed me to the Place Lamartine, Vincent's subject for his 'Yellow House' and the rue Mireille for 'The Old Mill'. As we left the mill, he said, "Why would Theo engage you to try to find out these things when his brother committed suicide?"

"Because he does not believe his brother killed himself."

The mail carrier rounded on me. "That is nonsense, Monsieur. But if you are looking for a murderer am I a suspect. Because if so ..."

"... Steady on Joseph, I'm not accusing anybody. I tend to agree with you, but there hasn't been any investigation into Vincent's death. Theo just wants to be sure that I cover all avenues."

"You must think somebody murdered him, or you wouldn't be asking all these questions?"

"Like I said I have no idea at this point in the investigation. But some anomalies have not been satisfactorily explained."

"You mean the missing pistol."

"That is one – yes."

As we stopped to rest on a public seat in the hospital grounds. Joseph said "But why would anybody want to kill him Monsieur? I always found him to be solitary and quite sad really. He did have a fiery temper at times, but I don't know of anybody who would want to do him that sort of harm."

"I get what you're saying, Joseph. But that doesn't mean he wasn't a problem to somebody."

Joseph stroked his broad beard, thoughtfully. After a few moments silence, he said, "He did mention that a couple of young boys teased him at times. He found it annoying, but he made little of it."

"Do you know who these young boys are?"

"I don't recall him telling me that. No, I'm sure he didn't."

This new lead sounded promising, and I needed to follow it. Well, I needed to develop something and all I had, so far, appeared to be dead ends. "How can I find out about these boys?"

Joseph shrugged. "I don't know, Monsieur. Now I have to be going," he said, rising from the seat.

"Before you go, did you know Vincent when he lost part of his ear?"

"You mean when he cut off his ear."

"Is it not possible that somebody else could have injured him in that way?"

"I have heard rumours about Monsieur Gauguin. He had a sharp rapier, but it is highly unlikely that he did it."

"Why? They did have a volatile relationship."

Vincent told me they went to bullfights together; usually, after a matador defeated the bull, he'd get the ear of that bull as a symbol of his triumph."

"And you think Vincent emulated that?"

"It's a possibility."

"Yes. Everything is."

"He turned to me. "You need to look at it in this context and think about the fact that Gauguin seemed satisfied with women, unlike Vincent who wanted to hand his ear to his friend and admit

his defeat.”

“Or maybe Gauguin took it?”

“No Monsieur. Vincent gave part of his severed ear to a prostitute as some bizarre gift. Why on earth would he have done that unless he had cut off his ear?”

“What is the name of this prostitute?”

Joseph mounted his bike. “Monsieur, I am a married man. What would I know of prostitutes?”

“I am not suggesting anything, Joseph. I thought, what with you being the mail carrier you would know most people around here.”

“All I know is he had a rather unusual taste in women: he liked them faded, worn-out. He told me he went to such great lengths that once, Vincent put his hand over the flame of a candle and promised to keep it there until it was possible for him to see the woman he had fallen in love with.”

“So, he tended to be a womaniser.”

“He loved women very quickly, but they often let him down. Most of the women he loved were either widows or prostitutes. Although this is not unusual with artists.”

“Did he have anyone special to him?”

“His favourite, Sien, a woman with whom he lived for a while, became pressured into leaving him.”

“Why?”

“He wanted to marry her despite his family opposing the match.”

“Why did they oppose the marriage?”

He shrugged. “They knew Vincent. What else can I say?”

“Did he give her his ear?”

“No. I am not aware of that woman's, Monsieur.

“The prostitute?”

“That's all I know.”

“Which is?” I could see the annoyance on his face, but I had to keep pressing.

“Vincent went mad and tried to kill Gauguin with a knife. Gauguin threatened to leave, and Vincent mutilated himself. End of story.”

“When you say he went mad do you mean he had a seizure?”

Joseph shrugged. “It's possible of course. But I am a mail carrier, not a doctor. However, when my uncle Pierre had fits, he could not have pursued anyone with a knife. He just lay in a mess on the floor.” He began to ride off. “Now I have to get back to my family.”

“Just one more Question, Joseph.”

He paused, stopping his bike. “WHAT NOW?”

“Those two boys who annoyed poor Vincent. Who are they?”

“I told you I'm not sure. I've seen those delinquents around the town on occasion, but I have never spoken to them, except to tell them to leave my bike alone.”

“Just one last question, then you can go. “Do you know anyone else who might know who those boys are?”

As he rode away, he said, “You could try Joseph d' Omano the chief of police around here.”

I had done my best to avoid involving the police but perhaps the time had come. I figured the Gendarmerie would most probably know about the boys, especially if the brothers were trouble makers. Modern cops don't generally like private investigators, who they see as interfering busybodies. Back in 19th Century France, who knows? Perhaps it wasn't such a smart idea, though. They may think I'm interfering and, worse, criticising their findings. Besides, I had no credentials and no introduction and may very well be arrested and find myself stuck in this timeline. Although Jennifer had told me, I could summon the Quantime anytime anywhere. I would prefer to do so unobtrusively, though and certainly not in the middle of a police station.

Chapter 18

Now alone, I sat at one of the long wooden bench tables Vincent had featured in his Carrel in Arles restaurant interior artwork. The tables were set in lines and attended to by a single waitress who served the dozen or so patrons having dinner. I needed to get a lead on the troublesome boys, so I decided to stay the night and resume my search after a good night's sleep. I received a warm welcome from Albert Carrel and his wife Catherine, who informed me that Vincent had stayed there a year before. As I picked up my room key, she said, “Some people thought Vincent very strange and even scary, but he always acted very polite and gracious when he stayed here. He seemed a kind but misguided soul.”

“And now his is gone,” I sighed.

“Albert and I were sorrowful to hear of his passing. Are you related?” she asked.

“Not that I am aware,” I answered, wondering how my Irish brogue could be mistaken for Dutch.

“Then, why are you so interested in his death, Monsieur?”

Keeping it simple, I answered, “Theo Van Gogh has hired me to find out about his brother's death. Do you know who might be able to help me in this respect?”

Albert, who just emerged from the kitchen, suggested, “I would go to the hospital and talk with a Doctor Felix. I believe he treated the artist for epilepsy.”

I spent the night in the same room Vincent had used. Although it did not give me any further insights into his death it felt strange being in the same bed, the artist had used.

Following an uneasy night's sleep, downstairs at breakfast, in the restaurant, the waitress served me hot, buttered Croissants with freshly ground coffee. Feeling replete, I went over to Catherine, at the reception desk, and handed her my key.

Catherine said, “I trust you slept well Monsieur.”

Not wanting to get into any details it was easier to lie. “Very well thank you. Now I must look for Dr Felix.”

Much to my surprise, she handed me an envelope. “This came for you. I found it here this morning.”

As I had told no one anything about my accommodation arrangements, I wondered who could have left the note.

As Catherine handed it to me, she would have noticed the puzzled look on my face. “Who knew

you were staying at the Carrel in Arles?”

“I have no idea.” I took my mail. Sherlock Holmes would have solved the crime from the clues left on the envelope alone, but my detective skills weren't up to his standard. “Thank you, Catherine, I may be back later, depending on how things go.”

The envelope addressed to Monsieur Oswald Doyle, had me puzzled and concerned. The mysterious writer also knew my name. Inside, a neatly written note, short and to the point, read:

If you want to know what happened to Vincent Van Gogh, meet me at the Trinquetaille Bridge at 11.15 this morning.”

Without sharing the content, I looked at Catherine. “Do you know who delivered this?”

“No Monsieur, I discovered it on the counter when I got back from the kitchen.”

I scratched my head. “Who, apart from Albert and yourself knew I stayed here?”

she shrugged, “I do not know Monsieur.”

“No, and I don't know either.”

Chapter 19

I left the Carrel in Arles and made my way to the local hospital. While walking, I pondered over who could have written the note. And, more importantly, what did the writer know about Vincent? It crossed my mind it could be a trick to coax me to the bridge, but for what reason? Curiosity got the better of me. I became intrigued by the note and decided to go to the rendezvous to find out where it would lead me. But first I wanted to talk to Dr Felix.

In my day, the courtyard of the former Arles hospital is now named 'Space Van Gogh,' in memory of their most famous patient. It's currently a centre for Van Gogh's works, several of which are considered masterpieces. In Vincent's day, it wasn't the case.

The Old Hospital of Arles, also known as Hôtel-Dieu-Saint-Espirit, built in the 16th and 17th centuries, showed age and decay. I walked through its main entrance, on Rue Dulau. In 1835 three new wings had been built to accommodate a severe cholera epidemic. In one of these wings, I found Dr Felix Rey, commonly known as Dr Felix. His dark, pointed beard and pursed lips gave him a somewhat demonic appearance. But the softness in his blue eyes showed his sensitivity and compassion. I thought he looked tired, but I still needed to ask him a couple of things. As I approached him, he headed off, after a nurse. I followed and, catching up; I said, “Dr Felix, can I have a word with you?”

He stopped speaking to the nurse and turned to the sound of my voice. “What do you want, Monsieur? He asked, impatiently.

“I would like a few minutes of your time to talk about Vincent Van Gogh.”

“I don't have a few moments to give you Monsieur. Sick people need attending to.” He turned to leave.

“It's for his brother. He needs to know some things.”

His compassion showed. Turning to me, he said, “How is Theo coping with this tragedy?”

“Not good I'm afraid, doctor. I realise this is a bad time but...”

He forced a smile. “...Come back here at two o'clock Monsieur and I will give you your few minutes then.”

I left the hospital and headed towards my rendezvous point to meet the mystery letter writer. The fact that Dr Felix Rey, his real name, had invited me to ask him questions about Vincent proved a good result. From his admiration of Theo, I noted that Vincent's brother seemed to be respected and thought well of by many people. Using his good name seemed to open doors that would otherwise have remained closed. I then turned my attention to the matter of the note. My fob watch told me it was 10 am. That gave me ample time to get to the bridge. I took another look at the letter but found no clues that might have given me any inkling about the person who had left the message. The neat handwriting and concise message, suggested the writer to be erudite and straight to the point. It also suggested that Van Gogh's alleged suicide may not have happened the way the authorities recorded it.

Chapter 20

After waiting for a while at the Trinquetaille Bridge, I checked my pocket watch. It read 11:21 am. The mysterious note writer still hadn't shown up. They were running late or worse, not even coming. I scanned the area looking for any signs of life. The bridge, itself, quite unusual as bridges go, comprised stone steps leading pedestrians to its covered walkway. Situated at the delta of the Grande Rhone, it formed part of the Camargue, south of the town. I stared at some flotsam making its way slowly along the waterway. Then I heard a voice.

“Mr Doyle, this became a favourite subject of the grand master.”

I looked into the face of an attractive woman, probably in her late thirties/early forties, wearing a long black dress. She wore a bonnet that covered her short blond hair and shaded most of her face. Her attire showed she wasn't going to reveal her true identity. She stopped a few feet from me. The slight Irish lilt to her voice reminded me of home.

“Mr Doyle, you want to know what happened to the painter.”

It seemed more a statement than a question. “There is some suggestion that the artist may not have died by his hand. I am investigating this to see if there is any truth in such a theory. Your note suggested you may know something, Madame?”

“Oh, Mr Doyle I know many things.”

“Who are you?”

“A traveller, like yourself. And like yourself I am incognito.”

“What do you mean?” I wondered who this strange woman could be?

She became silent.

I asked, “How do you know about me and what I am doing?”

Her next words shocked me to the core. “I know that you do not belong here.”

I stood transfixed. “What do you mean?”

she wagged her finger, as though I were a naughty boy. “You know very well what I mean. I have no idea how you have achieved this miracle but what you are doing is very dangerous. My advice to you is to go back to your time before it is too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“Before you cause irreparable damage to God's creation.”

“That's a bit melodramatic, don't you think?” I threw back.

“You are messing with time.”

I nearly said I messed with space, not time, but it was no time for semantics. Instead, I asked again, “Who are you?”

“If it is important to you my name is Mary Wood, and I can see things others cannot see.”

“What like having second sight?” I asked.

“What do you know about Clairvoyance Mr Doyle?”

To tell the truth, I knew nothing practically. I didn't even know if I believed in it. “Only that clairvoyants claim to have a knowledge of people and events beyond the ordinary scope of human perception.” Then the light dawned. “So you know something about Van Gogh's death.”

She smiled at me. “I think we could make a trade.”

“Trade?”

“I will give you an insight into what I know and you, in return, will tell me how you can travel back in time.”

Shocked, I stood open-mouthed. I certainly wasn't expecting that. “I don't know how it works. I'm only the person trying it out.”

she looked thoughtful. “So tell me what it is like in your time. You can do that, can't you?”

I nodded. “There is so much to speak about, Ms Wood. Where do you want me to start?”

She suddenly became very stern; her face became hard. “You are irresponsible Monsieur Doyle. You must not speak to me of such things.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is not the time for us to know of them. Everything and every time under heavens has its place. If we upset the order of things, who knows what will happen? If you change anything from this time the repercussions in your day can be tremendous. This much I do know.”

Puzzled, I said, “But, as a clairvoyant can you not see into the future?”

Her next words chilled me. “Yes, which is how I know what you are doing out of ego is fraught with danger.”

“Ego! Well, you could construe it as ego, but it's more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Theo Van Gogh needs closure. He is dying and needs to know the truth of his brother's death.”

She searched my eyes. “I can tell you, but can I trust you? Before we progress in this matter, I have to decide.”

“Trust me about what?”

“I know where you are staying. I will contact you soon, with my decision. For now, let me say this. You cannot change anything in history without it affecting a whole lot of other things.”

I watched and wondered who this extraordinary woman was, as she turned about and walked back over the bridge.

Chapter 21

“This used to be a significant place,” Dr Rey mentioned, indicating the hospital with a sweep of his arm. “In fact, during the early sixteenth century thirty-two charitable institutions were serving this area. The archbishop of Arles decided to consolidate the agencies into one organisation at the centre of Arles, and it became this hospital.”

I nodded intelligently in response to his knowledge sharing, as I sat with him in the hospital refectory, supping passable coffee. “What did Vincent talk to you about while you modelled for him?”

“He didn't say much at all. He opened up more as my patient, but only when prompted by my questions. You must understand Vincent kept things very much to himself.”

“What did you find out about him, during your sessions?”

He told me that after his discharge from the hospital in Arles, he found it increasingly difficult to organise his life or even set up a new studio.”

“Did he say why?”

“He attributed his breakdown to excessive drink and perhaps tobacco, although he gave up neither. However, fearful of a relapse, in May 1889, he voluntarily admitted himself to the psychiatric hospital of Saint-Paul-de Mausole. It was a former monastery, just outside of Saint-Rémy, 15 miles from Arles.”

“Surely such a voluntary act shows he wasn't insane.” Doyle reasoned.

“It's not that clear cut. Vincent told me he wished to remain shut up as much for his peace of mind as for other people's.”

“He told you this?”

“He told the admitting physician, Dr Théophile Peyron, who noted that Van Gogh suffered from 'acute mania' with hallucinations of sight and hearing.”

“I should like to speak with this doctor.”

“You will be wasting your time, Monsieur Doyle. Confidentiality clauses with our patients prevent us from being specific concerning our exchanges, but generally, myself and two other doctors involved in his treatment diagnosed Vincent as being an epileptic.”

“I see. That would have made things even more difficult for the painter. So what triggered Vincent's epileptic attacks?”

Dr Rey looked at me. “The medical profession does not know much about the causation of this malady. But it is believed by physicians that such things as anxiety, lack of sleep and alcohol can trigger the seizures.”

“Would you say that Vincent suffered from such things?”

“Let me put it this way. As a young intern, I first encountered Vincent during one of his extreme unbalanced mind states, shortly after his ear mutilation episode.”

“What did he say about that?”

“He wasn't at all rational at the time. He constantly blamed another artist who stayed with him.”

“Paul Gauguin.”

“Yes, I believe that to be his name.”

“And you did not believe Vincent's accusations.”

“As a junior doctor at the time it wasn't my concern, but something about his pleading stirred something in me.”

“Did anybody Question Monsieur Gauguin about this?”

“The police thought Vincent was mad and ignored his entreaties. So I spoke with Gauguin about the incident. He said Van Gogh had gone mad and cut off part of his left ear.”

“And, despite the fact they were known to argue often, you believed him?”

Felix seemed to be becoming agitated. After a long shift at the hospital, he appeared to be suffering from fatigue. “Dr Rey, I appreciate you sharing this with me because I need to know if he killed himself or if another hand was involved.”

“Anybody is capable of suicide when they can no longer face life. When life holds more fear to them than death what do they have to live for?”

“Can you base the act of suicide on a glib philosophical viewpoint, doctor?”

Rey's tired eyes narrowed. Dr Gachet spent much more time with him than I did. Speak with him.”

“I have and may well do so again.” I got up to leave; then another point came to mind. “One more question, doctor. In your professional opinion is it at all likely, given Vincent's anxious state of mind, that he could have had a seizure while trying to kill himself?”

Felix twiddled his thumbs. “Yes, it is possible, if his anxiety levels were dangerously high.”

“And that could be why the bullet missed his heart.”

Dr Rey smiled, knowingly. “If he had a seizure he would be lucky to be able to hold a gun, let alone hit any part of his anatomy. But we will never know if that's what happened, will we?”

I smiled. Vincent's likely incapacitation seemed an important clue. I needed to speak with Dr Gachet again. I also needed to get to the bottom of the cut ear affair. To do this, I needed to carry out some research on the computer, which meant I had to go back to my time again.

Chapter 22

After another uncomfortable night on Jennifer's couch, I carried out a search on her laptop computer to find out about Vincent's ear severing affair. The consensus was that there wasn't any foul play. He had, for whatever reason severed part of his left ear with a kitchen knife. He then presented the piece of torn flesh to a prostitute he knew.

It was time to follow up this piece of the jigsaw. Quantime travel - exchange actually - was becoming easier for me. I loved the simplicity of it, as a mode of transportation. I just sat in the pumpkin and Jennifer only pressed a button. Before I knew it, I had arrived back in France. I checked to see if I had the pendant. Then it hit me. It would be too bad if I hadn't. I must remember to check before I leave home base in future.

I emerged from the Q' behind a large unused shed. It seemed that the Q could somehow detect if anyone could see it when it appeared. I made a note to ask Jennifer about that. I walked out from behind the shed and found myself in Rue Favorin, a busy street in Auvers. I passed kids playing with hoops and tops on the path, a man delivering sacks of coal and a woman scrubbing her front step. I walked past more homes; Then I came to 13 Rue Favorin, a respectable looking townhouse that blended in with the other private residences. More carriage traffic was lined up outside that

address than any other dwelling in the street. This congestion, I assumed, was being mainly due to the business carried out inside. I was there because I heard that Rachel, the prostitute presented with Vincent's ear, had since moved to Auvers. I rang the brass bell attached to the front door, which opened revealing a dark-haired woman in maid's attire.

She smiled sweetly, "Yes Monsieur can I help you?"

"I am looking for Mademoiselle Rachel Fiore. I believe she works here."

She curtsied, quaintly, and invited me into a parlour decorated stylishly with a blood red patterned carpet. There were two other men in the room, seated, one reading, one smoking. They remained silent, and I had nothing to say to them. Maybe they felt uncomfortable, waiting in the brothel. I certainly did, and I wasn't even there to taste the delights on offer.

After about ten minutes a buxom blond, probably in her forties but still attractive, walked up to me. "I am Rachel, Monsieur. Why do you want to see me?"

"It's about Vincent, the artist."

"I'm I very busy right now. If you buy me a drink, I will speak with you later. Pick me up at seven pm, when I finish for the day."

With time on my hands I sat in a park and went over my research notes:

February 1888 V moved to Arles:

V began to dream of starting artist colony, painting South France

Rented small Yellow House, 2 Place Lamartine, 15 francs monthly

Theo gets P G to stay with V

Painters got on well at first. They ate, drank and painted together

Things didn't stay happy for long

Eventually, Gauguin found it impossible to live with V

When Gauguin said he was leaving V was devastated.

That's all I knew to be factual about the case. The rest was still hazy, with different versions of events.

I had to fill in five hours before meeting M Fiore so I got thinking about Café de la Gare, where Vincent had stayed while waiting to move into the Yellow House. It's hard to get past the fact that Arles is where Vincent van Gogh cut off his ear and 'gifted' it to a prostitute, but that sort of infamy only added to the town's charm. I would dearly have spent that time speaking with Joseph and Marie Ginoux, proprietors of the said Café de la Gare but I didn't have enough time to travel to Arles and back by Seven pm. I understood Vincent began renting a room there on the May seventh, 1888. He quickly became friends with the Ginouxs, who accepted all kinds of down-and-outs into their establishment. I recalled, from my research, in a letter to his brother what Vincent wrote about the hotel: in August 1888:

Today I am probably going to begin doing a painting of the interior of the café where I have a room, by Gaslight, in the evening. It is what they call here a "Café de Nuit" (they are relatively frequent here), staying open all night. "Night Prowlers" can take refuge there when they have no money to pay for a lodging, or are too drunk to be taken in.

So the Ginouxs seemed good people to ask about the severed ear episode. It would have been much easier for me to have gone back to that time and spoken to Vincent direct, but, according to

Jennifer, it wasn't possible. I was puzzled about this, but she explained that I couldn't investigate a case before the case existed. I didn't know if such rules applied in the quantum realms and questioned her about this. It was a good question, and Jennifer gave it some thought. Then she pointed out that if I started mixing timelines and variations of realities I could end up in all sorts of trouble. She also said that if she didn't know the precise moment and the exact location, an incident occurred she couldn't programme the Quantime accordingly.

Chapter 23

I hadn't worked out the exchange rate, but another extraordinary thing about particle assimilation is that my English currency automatically became French money. Whether or not it is equivalent to the amount I had in English I am not sure. I had hoped that the Q space-time could provide me with more money than I currently had with me. Sadly, it wasn't the case. So I hoped my limited funds would suffice for an evening out with Rachel. So far the money had paid for the carriage currently standing outside 13 Rue Favorin, where I waited for Rachel to show up. Then I saw her standing outside the brothel, talking to another woman. I whistled in her direction, and as soon as I had her attention I waved, and she came over. She settled in beside me. She smiled, revealing small dimples in her glowing cheeks, then, much to my surprise, she snuggled up close. "Monsieur, we are indeed travelling in style."

I hoped my rapidly diminishing money would keep us in style for the evening. "Well, you seem like a stylish kind of lady."

She leant over and kissed me on the cheek. "I think I like you, Monsieur."

I tapped on the carriage ceiling. "Take us to the Auberge Ravoux." With the promise of Rachel's company, I had decided to stay in France for the night.

The evening felt pleasantly warm. Couples were promenading around, while drinkers and revellers kept the atmosphere abuzz with cheer and banter. Rachel and I, taking advantage of the balmy evening, sat outside the café, sipping house red. I said, "I'm staying here, in the room that Vincent rented."

"Yes Monsieur, I came here to model for him."

I nodded thoughtfully. "It feels strange staying in that room. But I thought it might help me to get to know something about the artist." She seemed miles away and didn't respond, so I asked, "What did you think of Vincent?"

She sipped her wine. "Such a sad man but always courteous and kind. Vincent appeared straightforward and childlike in some ways."

"Is that why he signed his name as a child would?"

She thought about this, then answered, "He never signed any of his paintings with van Gogh. During his stay in England, which he told me about, he got fed up with people misspelling his name: instead of van Gogh, they called him Van Gof. So he began signing all his painting as Vincent."

"I guess it makes sense. But why did Vincent tell you.?"

"I felt sorry for him because he had no real friends, I think he felt very lonely."

"But he had his friend Gauguin staying with him."

She spat at the sound of his name. "Vincent told me about him. He was no real friend to Vincent. He played games and used him." She leant closer to me. "Do you know Vincent's brother paid Gauguin to stay in Arles with him. Of course, he wasn't supposed to know this, but he must have

found out.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, one day, while he was painting my picture, he became angry and started throwing things around. I grabbed my clothes and got out of that room as soon as I could. He seemed to be going crazy.”

“Do you know why he became angry?”

“He said that he and Gauguin had a row, and Paul told him about the arrangement he had with Theo. He felt devastated because he'd believed Gauguin's lies and deception about friendship. He was no real friend to Vincent.”

Our empty glasses needed replenishing so I poured more wine into them. “Rachel, can you tell me about the ear incident?”

She shuddered at the memory. “It turned my stomach, Monsieur. He came to me, at the brothel. When he first arrived, I saw that his roughly bandaged left ear oozed blood, and he was in a terrible state. He said nothing and presented me with a small parcel. When I opened it only to find part of his ear, I couldn't believe it. It disgusted me. How could he do such a thing to me?”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“He just stood there, with a strange grin on his face. He told me the parcel showed how much he loved me. What a bizarre declaration.”

“Did you model for him after that?”

“No, of course not. I couldn't bear to be near Vincent again. I could not even stay in the same town.”

“That was when you moved to Auvers?”

“Yes, Ollie.”

I loved the way she said my name.

Her eyes clouded over. There was sadness behind her striking blue pupils. I wanted to offer comfort to her. I tentatively touched her right hand, across the wooden table, in the glow of a candle.

She smiled weakly, “Thank you, Ollie. I do not normally get shown such tenderness.”

“It was not your fault,” I said, tenderly.

“To Vincent, I was just another person to let him down. My shocked response over the severed ear devastated him.

I looked her in the eye, while gently stroking her hand. “He became self-destructive. He seemed to have sabotaged all his friendships.”

She raised her eyes to be level with mine. I was captivated by the attractive, compassionate woman opposite me.

She said tearfully, “I could do nothing for him. It seemed as though he desperately needed friends, but his neediness proved too much for them. Even his few closest friends found him too much at times. My heart went out to that sensitive but very strange man. I felt sorry when I heard he had died. But I am not surprised he committed suicide. His short life seemed full of heartbreak.”

I leant across the table and spoke quietly. “Rachel, I appreciate the way you have told me these

things without asking why I want to know. The thing is that Theo Van Gogh has hired me to find out what happened to his brother. He thinks that Vincent may not have shot himself.”

Her beautiful blue eyes widened. “Do you mean that somebody may have killed Vincent?”

“It’s possible. The more the evidence adds up, the more it seems likely. What you have told me helps me to build up a picture of Vincent, but I don’t know enough yet.”

“Monsieur, I would like you to keep me informed. The artist, although very strange at times, always came over as a genuine person.” She looked me in the eye, smiling, “I felt important when he painted my picture.”

When the police found Vincent in his bed, covered in blood, they initially thought he was dead, perhaps by suicide. When Gauguin felt the body and discovered that Van Gogh was still alive, he asked the police to wake him gently, and if Vincent were to ask for Gauguin, to say that he had returned to Paris.

I yawned. It had been a long day. Besides, my funds were down to a few francs. It wasn’t as though I could pop back to an ATM and draw out more money. Feeling drained I looked forward to a good night’s sleep. Then I realised I did not have enough left to pay for a carriage, and I couldn’t get credit. I looked at Rachel sheepishly. “I’m sorry, but I have no money for a carriage to take you home. I will, of course, walk with you, if you wish.”

She held my left hand in her right hand, across the table. “I could always stay with you Monsieur” Then she laughed, “And I don’t even know your last name.”

Her boldness stunned me. I didn’t know how to answer, except tell her my name. “Doyle, Ossie Doyle.

“Ossie. I like that, Monsieur What do you think of my outrageous proposition?”

“I find it to be acceptable,” I grinned widely. “Except my room is small with only the one small bed.”

“How many beds do we need Ossie?” she winked.

On the way to my room, I visited the toilet. Rachel went ahead with the room key, saying she would be waiting. I became sexually excited at the prospect of spending the night with this beautiful French woman. But things did not turn out exactly as I had expected.

Chapter 24

I found it difficult to sleep that night. Apart from my mind being full of questions about the case, the rough floor, upon which I lay, wrapped only in a blanket, made for an uncomfortable night.

I hasten to add that when I reached my room, Rachel, having had a little too much vino, was snoring softly, curled up on the bed. Taking up most of the limited single bed space, she had staked her claim and considered the bed conquered territory. Any romantic ideas I might have held that night quickly evaporated. This disappointing state of affairs left me little space and simply with just a cushion, blanket and floor space, as my sleeping quarters. Camping on the floor wasn’t what I had expected when spending a night sleeping with a prostitute. Still, she hadn’t charged me for services rendered. But then none had been given.

As I tried to get comfortable, I thought about Annie Wood. How come she had visited France at the same time as I? It seemed likely that she had some strange part to play in this Q’ scenario. But what role would she have to play were I not there? What strange force, if any, had made our paths cross? Then it occurred to me that she lived in her time, I didn’t. So, whatever brought her to Arles had nothing to do with my case. However, she had contacted me out of the blue and, surprisingly, knew

my reason for being there. As well as the fact I that I had come from another time. Spooky!

Rachel's snoring made it difficult for me to sleep. Still, as my mind whirled, filled with the case, her breathing noises made little difference. It seemed that all the people I had spoken to about Vincent had a legitimate role to play in the Vincent saga. All except Annie Wood, who, like me, was a stranger in France. I wanted to find out her reason for being there in France at this time. Where's Google when you need it?

Chapter 25

I awoke from a fitful sleep, wondering if I had fallen out of bed, when I noticed the said bed contained an attractive woman, with blond hair fanned out around her head. Then I remembered - Rachel!

She opened an eye, groaned, and promptly closed it again. I knew there would be no sexual satisfaction from that quarter that morning. Besides, I needed to clear my head and try to get my skeletal frame into some semblance or working order. Turning my back on her, I decided that a walk in the early morning sunshine would sort out my stiff limbs. As it turned out, the morning offered up a summer shower instead. I had imbibed a fair bit of wine myself the night before, and I had to be in sparkling form today to continue with my investigation.

So, with a brisk step, I set out on my morning promenade. Still early, nothing much was stirring; I had the streets largely to myself. My senses leapt to life, enthralled by the dawn chorus and captivated by the smell of freshly baked bread wafting from the bakery. As I walked, I thought about my mysterious meeting with Annie Wood. I felt annoyed at the way the clairvoyant had teased me with titbits and made bold declarations that she knew things but never told me what they were. It seemed a waste of my time. I wondered if she would contact me again. If so I would not allow her to treat me in such an off-hand way.

Rachel had emerged from the bed when I returned. "So you're up," I said, making an obvious and inane remark.

"I am sorry Ossie. It could not have been much fun for you last night."

I grinned. "I don't know. The floor's not bad when you get used to it."

"There's room in the bed now," she said, in a sultry manner.

I looked at her, not knowing how to respond.

"For both of us," she added smiling lasciviously.

She looked quite delectable, in a half dishevelled, half asleep way. "It's a very tempting offer, Rachel but there is someone I have to see."

"I would like you just to hold me for a moment," she murmured in a little girl way.

Just because she was into her forties did not preclude her from needing a little tenderness. I had no idea about her life, but I am a sucker for responding to vulnerability. I cuddled her close, rocking her gently. Then we lay on the bed and hugged while she cooed and stroked my hair. I began to become sexually stimulated and became very close to forgetting my investigation. Resisting giving in to my animal instinct, by applying tremendous effort and willpower, I moved slightly away from Rachel. "I'm sorry, but I have to go."

She looked at me, drinking me in. "I think you are a nice man. Maybe we can get together later."

"Yes, I'd like that." Now I had to get back to Arles, which meant either a long uncomfortable coach or train ride to the South of France or an instantaneous Q' experience, via the 21st century. I opted

for the latter.

I felt less disoriented but still exhausted as I climbed from the Q. Particle assimilation exchange took it out of me. Jet lag is bad enough, but this was space-time lag, an entirely different ball game. France would have to wait until the next day.

Chapter 26

During this time I stayed with Jennifer, I found myself becoming attracted to her. We had a professional bond, not a sexual one, but I had a yearning for that to change. Blokes so easily interpret any warmth from a woman as a come-on. When are we going to learn from that particular lesson?

Before I did any more quantum travelling in the Q, I went shopping with Jennifer. I guess shopping together for food can be quite an intimate experience, especially sharing the same trolley. So, as we wandered the aisles of Tesco's, picking up supplies, I learned a lot about her dietary habits. Jennifer, on the other hand, kept plying me with questions as we shopped. I answered all her questions to the best of my ability. Eventually, I got a chance to ask my question about unfreezing past time and adding more data to it, then freezing it again. As we surfed the frozen food aisle, I explained, "The way I see it is like opening a file on the computer, adding new information and saving it again. It is still the same file so nothing has changed. It just contains more info."

She did a cute behavioural thing when thinking about something. She curled a few strands of hair around her left index finger. As an investigator, I take a keen interest in people and their mannerisms. It can tell you a lot about them. From my observations over the years. It's often the little things, the subtle signs that give people away.

She tossed a pound of bacon into the trolley. "I like your computer file analogy. And I have performed computer simulations before, in which I have been able to add and take away information without leaving a trace in the archives. But as to whether it works that way in the material world I can only hazard a guess."

"Isn't everything that happens, recorded?" I queried.

She smiled warmly, "Some beliefs suggest that to be the case but there is no proof that it happens that way."

"What about cellular memory, Jennifer?" I asked, getting her attention as she scanned the hair shampoo aisle.

"Not being a biologist it's outside my field of expertise."

"Okay, what about the quantized field in your Quantime. Isn't it holographic, in that it stores data about any time and space in recorded history?"

She remained silent, so I continued, "How else could I be automatically dressed appropriately for the 1890's in southern France and be able to speak a language I have never learned, fluently?"

As a bottle of shampoo joined all the other consumables in the wire cage, Jennifer processed the question. Then she replied, "It's more a case of nothing being potentially anything. Take a '0' for example. It represents nothing but, in a quantised field it can become anything."

"Are you referring to a vacuum low energy state?" I asked, testing my limited knowledge to the limit.

"Yes, but in Quantum physics the vacuum does not exist. It becomes a plenum."

"What's that?" I asked, grabbing a jar of instant coffee.

“It’s the newly emerging scientific paradigm that comprehends space as being an all-pervading Quantum Plenum, seething with energetic potential.”

“I’m no scientist, but even I know that is fundamental quantum mechanics.”

“Yes, well if we are to make a significant and necessary leap forward in quantum physics we need to stop ignoring this most fundamental of all fields and develop from it a clear, precise, elegant and rigorous model which will enable our understanding of life, consciousness, and of science itself.”

I exhaled, whistling through my teeth, at the profundity and complexity of her statement. As I began unloading our supplies at the checkout, I said, “So, Jennifer, does that mean if I unfreeze time, by going into the past, any impact I have on it as potential and therefore, does not affect it at a material level.”

Jennifer, stunned by my explanation, said, “That’s just brilliant Ollie, but it only stays as potential if nothing is taken from or added to its non-quantised reality.”

We both stood in the queue - stunned by my revelation when I heard a voice say, “Next customer please.” That was us. We were holding people up.

As we relaxed doing everyday type stuff I got to like Jennifer more and more. Apart from being brilliant she also had a wicked sense of humour. We seemed to be getting on well together, and I felt excellent. “So how are you going to handle the Q’ thing?”

“What do you mean?” she asked as we snuggled up on her sofa together.

“Commercially, I guess. I mean once it becomes news, some fat cat is going to want it for...”

“...Ossie, I haven’t had to think that far ahead yet. It’s early days before I have to consider such things,” she responded brusquely, cutting across my flow.

She drew away from me. Seeing her defensiveness, I thought it best to avoid that particular subject. I said, “I have to get more cash. Is there an ATM close by?”

“Yes. Where we shopped this morning – at Tesco’s.” Then she smiled, “I’ll drive you there if you like.”

Having gotten cashed up, I treated the delightful Jennifer to coffee. As we supped, I brought up the subject of my time in France.

She asked me, “Do you have perfect recall of what went on for you in France?”

I had never actually considered the question, but on reflection, I seemed to have anything but perfect recall. “In fact, some of the minor details appear to be fading as time passed.”

“I wondered about that. I suspect it has to do with leaving that experience back where it belongs.”

“Why?”

She gave a shrug. “I don’t know for sure, but if you have unfinished business to attend to I suggest you go back to that time as soon as you can.”

“I agree, I’m itching to get back there, to solve this case.”

“Purely for academic reasons, I presume.”

I frowned, “Unfortunately, yes.”

She reached over and touched my arm, giving me tingles “We have to be careful, at least until we know what we are dealing with here. But I’m interested in this idea that the information of the past

eventually stays in the past.”

I said, “It's almost like it's an elastic band. We've pulled it this far away from its source, but it springs back.”

“Hm. It would be a good idea for you to pay particular attention to your recall when you go back there. See if you can remember what you have been doing here.”

Chapter 27

Having returned to Arles, I found myself back at the Hotel Carrel. As I passed reception, on the way to my room, Catherine handed me another letter. She asked, “Did you find out who is sending you these notes?”

“Yes. A woman called Annie Wood. Have you heard of her?”

She shook her head and went into the dining room.

Following her, I said, “Can you tell me about Vincent's stay here?”

She smiled. “Yes, Monsieur. Let me see now. He arrived in February 1888. Yes, it must have been around then because it snowed and blew a bitter Mistral wind.”

“Did you have any problems with him?”

Catherine straightened a cutlery setting at one of the tables. “Not at first. But sometimes he complained about things.”

“Such as?”

“The food. The artist asked for simple things, like potatoes. But Vincent wanted them every day. We couldn't provide that.”

I nodded, listening.

“We lent him a terrace for him to use as a studio, at no extra charge. However, my husband argued that as he used more room than any other resident a rent increase seemed fair.”

“How did Vincent respond to that?”

“He became furious and refused to pay. By the end of April, he decided to leave without paying the increase. My husband had to hold onto his things.”

“What did Vincent do then?”

“He lodged a complaint with the Judge. Two weeks later the Judge ruled in the artist's favour. The magistrate even had the gall to reproach my husband and told him to apologise to the artist.”

“So you never got paid.”

“We were just pleased to be rid of him.”

I nodded, “I see. So where did the painter go then?”

“He rented the Yellow House as his studio, while he lived at the Cafe de la Gare, run by the Ginoux family.”

“Yes, I need to speak with them.”

She frowned. “Be careful Monsieur, the Cafe de la Gare is filled with cut-throats and prostitutes.”

Upon reaching the said Hostelry, I saw what she meant. The Café de la Gare wasn't the most

salubrious of places. Of the handful of customers, three rolled around drunk while the other two laughed as they plied bawdy women with drinks. The café, with its night-time gas ceiling lamps and green ceiling, had become the haunt of local down-and-outs and prostitutes. I approached the bar, behind which stood a stocky man with a genial personality. “A glass of your finest ale please,” I said in my best French. As he handed it to me, I said, “Monsieur, are you Joseph Ginoux?”

“Yes. Why do you want to know?”

“I am trying to find out what happened to Vincent van Gogh when he cut off his ear.”

He stared at me. “Are you from the paper?”

“No. I'm investigating on behalf of Theo, the artist's brother. He wants to know what happened.”

He leant closer to me. Monsieur, Vincent was going to move into our small Yellow house, but it wasn't ready, so he stayed here.”

“What was he like?”

“Monsieur, look around you. Many of our customers are unfortunates, people who don't fit in with normal society. Vincent was one such person. He was friendly. We got on well together.”

“Do you know what happened when he cut off his ear?”

“I don't think he did it.”

As he served drinks, I said, “What do you mean?”

“After he moved into the Yellow House another artist, Paul Gauguin, stayed there with him. Vincent came here for a drink and told me they were not getting on together. Gauguin had a sword, a rapier I believe. What I heard was that they argued over a prostitute, outside the yellow house. It turned nasty, and Vincent brandished a kitchen knife. Gauguin got his sword and sliced off part of Vincent's ear.”

“You're suggesting Gauguin did it!”

“Yes, Monsieur.

“Why don't you think Vincent cut it off?”

“I first I did. But then I learned Vincent returned home while Gauguin stayed in a hotel. Later that night, after ten pm, the police had been alerted and went to the Yellow House, which had blood smears and bloody hand prints up the stairs. In his bedroom, they found Vincent with blood-soaked rags. He was unconscious through loss of blood. If the police had not got to him, he would have died.”

“I still don't see how this tragedy points towards Gauguin,” I said, trying to see some link.

“Monsieur neither did I until the next day. When the police found Vincent in his bed, covered in blood, they initially thought he was dead, perhaps by suicide. Gauguin, who had returned to the Yellow House, felt the body and discovered that Van Gogh was still alive. He asked the police to wake him gently, and if Vincent asks for Gauguin, to say that he had returned to Paris.

“Why did Gauguin return?”

Joseph shrugged. I believe as soon as he heard the police were involved he went back as the caring friend and to give his version of events first.”

“It's possible, Monsieur Ginoux, but not the only explanation.”

I wasn't convinced and didn't think Gauguin was a candidate for murdering Vincent. For one thing, slicing off a piece of an ear with a rapier, without wounding Vincent's head, would take extraordinary skill. It was much more likely that they had the row; Vincent went inside his house to smoulder, and Gauguin went into town to cool down. I finished my beer. Then I asked, "Did Gauguin come in here that night?"

"As a matter of fact, he did."

Hallelujah, I thought. We were onto something. "Did the police come here for Vincent?"

"Yes, Monsieur. He went away with them."

"Back to the Yellow House?"

He shrugged again. "I expect so,"

I made some notes about this back in my room. Shortly afterwards, I received a visitor. He announced himself, with an air of importance, as Joseph d' Amano, Chief of Police. A somewhat grand title, I thought, for the head cop in this little country town. I looked at him puzzled, wondering why the 'Chief of Police' would be calling on me. "How can I help you?"

The portly, well-dressed officer, in his crisp uniform, pushed his way into my room saying, "Take a seat Monsieur. I need to ask you some questions."

With the only chair occupied by the overweight Gendarme, I sat on the single bed. "What questions, officer?"

"It has come to my notice that you are asking questions about Vincent Van Gogh, the artist who shot himself."

"Yes, I have been asked to investigate the matter."

"Who has asked you to do this?"

"I am not prepared to divulge my client's name." I felt honourable saying that.

He shuffled in his seat. "Monsieur Doyle, In Arles the police investigate these matters, not 'amateurs'," he almost spat with derision.

Amano's arrogance fired me up. "Oh, and what have your investigations revealed so far, Chief Amano?"

He stared at me for a moment. "Monsieur, I will tell you this much. Vincent Van Gogh arrived at the Auberge Ravoux, in Auvers, around 7 pm. Witness statements say he walked bent, holding his stomach, while exaggerating his habit of holding one shoulder higher than the other. Vincent then crossed the hall, climbed the staircase and went to his bedroom. A witness at the scene said he made such a strange impression on us that, around midnight, he got up and went to the staircase to see if he could hear anything. He thought I could hear groans, he walked upstairs quickly and found Vincent on his bed, laid down in a crooked position, knees up to his chin, moaning loudly. "What's the matter," the man asked, "are you ill?" Vincent then lifted his shirt and showed him a small gunshot wound in the region of his heart. The man cried out, "Poor soul, what have you done?"

"I have tried to kill myself," replied Van Gogh.

Impatient, I responded, "I understand that but we don't know what went on in that wheat field, do we?"

Amano became stern. "He admitted he tried to kill himself. That is good enough for the police. Now tell your mysterious client this and then leave this town and do not come back. If you return

here, Monsieur Doyle, I will have you charged with perverting the course of justice. Now, do yourself a favour and stop this nonsense.”

“But I have new evidence suggesting there may have been foul play.”

“What evidence, Monsieur?”

“The artist's epilepsy, the missing gun, Vincent's strange statement on his death bed...”

“...If there is any such evidence we will find it.”

“But you are not looking for any, are you?”

The chief got to his feet, leaving my question unanswered. I expected some intervention by the police, but I thought they might at least listen to any new evidence. It seemed I had gotten it wrong. The police chief proved intransigent.

As he left, Amano said, “You are warned, Monsieur Doyle.”

Chapter 28

By mid-afternoon, the warm summer day gave way to a chilly wind, with flurries of light rain beginning to set in. I looked at the letter Catherine had passed to me. Sure enough, it came from Annie Wood.

Despite my feelings that the mysterious Annie Wood had no real answers, she still intrigued me. She said she knew something about Vincent's shooting but had offered me nothing, so far. But even more freaky was her assertion about me being from another time, and berating me for it. Of course, she could be a nut job with nothing of any value to offer me. A fraud who, having some wicked fun at my expense, wanted to see me squirm. I am not one to suffer fools gladly especially when I turn out to be the fool. She had tricked me once. The question is, was I going to be dumb enough to give her the chance to have another go at my damaged ego? I looked at the note written in neat copperplate hand. Meet me at ten am outside the Yellow House. I decided to sleep on it to decide if I could trust her again.

With no new leads to go on, I decided to give her another chance, which is why I stood outside the dwelling Van Gogh rented in May 1888. His living Quarters comprised four rooms on the right-hand side of a house on the Place Lamartine. I looked at the green shutters and imagined the troubled genius at work on one of his masterpieces. It was called it the Yellow House, owing to the warm, buttery colour of paint on the exterior walls. He painted a rendition of the house in the tones of yellow that became regarded as his signature colour. But he never got to fulfil his to plan to cover the interior walls of the Yellow House with paintings of he's his beloved sunflowers.

My pocket watch read 10 am and Annie Wood arrived right on time. She carried an oriental looking parasol, as the heat of the day had become stifling. “I didn't know whether to come or not.” came my weak opening gambit.

“But here you are,” she smiled.

“I don't want to be given the run-a-round again,” I said, aiming my first thrust.

She behaved all sweetness and light. “Is that what you thought about yesterday's meeting, Monsieur Doyle?”

“Do you have anything useful?” I demanded testily.

“Let me tell you a story.”

I must have rolled my eyes because she said, “That sort of attitude is not going to help. Now are

you going to listen?”

She made me feel like some errant school boy, which didn't improve my mood. I sighed, “Okay tell me.”

“Let's say Vincent Van Gogh's death wasn't suicide by his hand. And let's say the perpetrator is still free. You may see that as an injustice.”

“From a legal and moral standpoint, yes.”

“But, moral judgements aside, it is the way that history writes it. Now let's say the perpetrator gets married and has children. One of the children grows up and becomes somebody who is a great benefit to humankind. What price your legal and moral judgement then?”

“The ends do justify the means in this case.”

“Surely, as a time traveller, you can appreciate that the ends and the means are one and the same.”

I thought about her statement for a moment. I could see how, in my case, the 'means', the Quantime' and the 'ends' the case, in a quasi-way, did become one and the same. “Okay, I get it.”

“Right, now let us take another scenario. In this version, the perpetrator, with your help, is caught and imprisoned or executed for his crime. Can you not see that the child who helps humanity would not have been born. So where is the greater good in this and where is the real justice?”

“Yes but this is all supposition.”

“True, but I think you get my point.”

“I know this is about my not interfering with history and I get that. The police officer in me thinks murder is murder, and the killer has to pay. However, I am now seeing that things are not always so black and white.”

She looked straight at me. “Monsieur Doyle, if I give you information that leads to the killer's arrest, I am complicit in your interference. I cannot have that on my conscience.”

I gritted my teeth. I breathed deeply to stop myself from exploding. 'Don't fuck me around, lady,' my mind said. “Enough of the lecture. Are you going to help, or not?”

“Only if you promise me you will not use any information that incriminates anybody from your findings. That what you discover is for personal use only. You must not report it to the authorities or make it public. Do you understand?”

I sighed heavily. “I understand, but I'm not sure about Theo Van Gogh, my client. How can I explain to him that his brother's killer must go free with no stain against his name?”

She stared at me. “I'm sorry Monsieur Doyle, but these are the conditions you must agree to before I help you.”

I had had enough. “Madame Wood, how do I know that you know anything about Vincent's death? You have told me nothing!”

She tutted, “Do you think I have nothing better to do than waste both your and my time? She paused, then said, “You are thinking about somebody who has not told you all they know. Someone who wears a uniform Monsieur. It's blue. Blue with brass buttons.”

My mind had wondered. “It's Joseph, the mail carrier,” I blurted, startled by her accuracy.

She continued, “There is something he has not told you, about a woman. Yes, he knows who she is but denies that he knows.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because he has something to hide. Something to do with this woman.”

I stood there amazed. So Joseph had been lying to me, and there seemed only one reason I could think of for his perfidy.

Without another word, she turned to walk away. I stood staring at those green shutters, tossing things around in my mind. “Will I see you again?”

She turned to face me. “If it is to be I will let you know the usual way.”

I couldn't figure it out but for some reason there seemed to be a universal directive that prohibited such things. Maybe Jennifer had an answer. I would ask her once I again returned to my time. Meanwhile, I had a couple of leads to follow up.

Chapter 29

Following a summer of painting in the sunny fields, Vincent had begun to exploring painting at night. It offered many challenges to the artist. He's creative endeavours resulted in the famous Café Terrace on the Place du Forum, Arles, at Night, which he completed in 1888. I felt the warm atmosphere of the 'night café; it was easy to see Vincent's fascination with the subject. The restaurant offered a study in contrasts, largely the glow of the gas-lit square against the dark sky. Tonight, alas, wasn't such an ideal night. Low clouds obscured the moon and threatened rain.

Joseph Roulin was playing dominoes with Auguste Ronnie, a long-time friend, when I reached the cafe, in the Place du Forum. I approached him, interrupting his game.

August Rionne looked up at me. Recognising me as the person who spoilt his game, he said, “Monsieur, do you take some perverse delight in interrupting our play?”

Taken aback by his directness I responded, “My apologies for your inconvenience but I need to speak with Joseph.”

Joseph said, “I have told you all I know. Now leave us to our game.”

Not willing to back down, I said, “What about the match you are playing with me?”

Joseph sat wide-eyed. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“I can either spell it out here or in private. Your choice Joseph.”

He paled, then turned to Auguste, “Sorry, but I had the best sort this out. I will be back very soon.”

As we walked away from the tables to the side of the café, out of earshot, he glared at me.

“You lied to me,” I calmly accused.

“How dare you confront me in such a way?” Joseph snarled.

I retorted, “And how dare you tell me lies? You know very well the name of the prostitute who received Vincent's ear lobe.”

He clenched his big fists and threatened to throw a punch in my direction. “I told you I do not know her.”

I was pushing my luck but could not back down. “Yes, and you lied. And I know why you lied. Rachel told me about your visits when you were supposed to be delivering mail. So you may as well come clean.”

“Why are you pursuing this, Monsieur?’ Rachel had nothing to do with his death.”

“And you know this because?”

“The ear thing happened two years ago. Rachel can't be of any help to you.”

I had had enough of this thrust and counter thrust. “Rachel is still very cut up about it. It changed their relationship, according to her.”

“It made her wary of him.” The mail carrier offered.

“It made her leave town!”

“It was just as well. I had to break it off with the prostitute.”

“Yes, I can understand that. What do did Rachel say to you about it?”

“What has that got to do with anything?” Joseph asked, brusquely – a sure sign he had something to hide.

“Tell me what she said or I will inform Augustine where you sometimes go when you are supposed to be working.”

The man looked like a trapped rabbit. “Rachel said she feared Vincent that night. She asked me to tell him not visit her anymore. That's all I know.”

“And you told the artist this?”

“Of course, I did. It wasn't easy, but I feared for Rachel.”

I could see I had exhausted that particular avenue of enquiry. “Thank you for your help, Joseph. Now you can get back to your game.”

Chapter 30

I had a theory that if I asked enough people my questions, sooner or later I would receive an answer. So I spent a few hours in Arles main street accosting members of the public and asking them if they had known Vincent, the artist, and, if so, had they seen any youths teasing him and making a nuisance of themselves. Nobody knew anything about it, but one woman suggested I try the local school. It seemed a good place to start. She gave me simple directions that soon found me there. I entered the small school. There was an office to the left. A woman of middle years looked up from her file sorting, saying, “Can I help you Monsieur?”

“I need to speak with the head teacher.”

“We only have one teacher, and he is teaching. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“What is his name?”

“Valantin Coued. Are you here about one of our students.”

“I don't know.”

“What do you mean Monsieur?”

“I don't know if they are students here,” I smiled.

“They! Then you are after more than one?”

“Excellent deduction Madame. Now if you could get Monsieur Coued for me.”

She huffed and went to his classroom.

She came back with a well-dressed man, probably early thirties, wearing wire-frame spectacles. He introduced himself as Valantin Coued.

“Monsieur Coued, my name is Doyle, and I am seeking the whereabouts of a couple of lads, who may be witness to a crime.”

Valantin's eyebrows shot up. “Really Monsieur Doyle.”

“Apparently, they teased an artist called Vincent Van Gogh. Have you heard of him?”

“I did speak to the artist a few times. Just pleasantries you understand. He also asked me about two boys that made fun of him. He was interested in finding them as well.”

“Do you by any chance know these boys?”

Valantin answered, “Yes, I used to teach them, well tried to at least. Lazy troublemakers those two.”

“And their names, if you please.”

“Oh yes, the Secletain brothers, Rene and - oh I forget the younger one's name.”

“One other thing. Do you know where the boys live?”

“Not really. When I taught those troublemakers, they lived near the Bouc canal, just off the towpath. I don't know if they still live there.” Then he asked, “Why do you want to see them?”

It seemed like a reasonable Question, and he had been helpful. “I'm investigating the circumstances of Van Gogh's death.”

“Monsieur, are you a gendarme?”

“No. I'm a private investigator, from England.”

“Really Monsieur. Your French is excellent.”

“Yes it is, isn't it?”

“Do you think the Secletain brothers had something to do with it?”

“I don't know yet. The boys were noticed hanging about Vincent that day. They may have seen something.”

“Monsieur, it is thought that he shot himself. Would you say there is another explanation?”

I smiled. “I won't know until evidence gives us our answer. Meanwhile, I have a job to do.”

“Then I shall bid you Adieu, Monsieur.”

As I turned, another question came to mind. Turning back to Valentin, I asked, “Bouc Canal, where is it?”

“Just out of town but it's quite a walk.”

“Thank you. Oh, do you know where I can hire a pony and trap?”

Chapter 31

My yellow two-wheeled cart rattled along the uneven surface of the road leading to The Langlois Bridge, one of the crossings over the Arles to Bouc canal. The nag pulling my cart had seen better days but 'Scallion' the horse's name, plodded onward to my destination - with no complaints. The bridge, a favourite subject of the great artist, built in the first half of the nineteenth century,

expanded the network of canals to the Mediterranean Sea. A major engineering feat in its day, it proved a great help in managing water and road traffic. I found out that Emile Secletain, the lock master, currently looked after the river traffic flow. He lived with his two boys in, what turned out to be a modest stone cottage situated on the far side of the canal.

Having crossed the bridge, I alighted from the cart and walked through an arbour, with an arch of fragrant camellias that led to the paint-faded front door. According to Valantin, Emile was a brutish man, especially when worse for the drink, which, the teacher divulged, tended to be most of the time. So I decided to be wary in my approach. He had become a heavy drinker following the death of Mary, his wife, two years before. However, having crossed the Langlois Bridge and followed the track to the Secletain residence, not about to give up, I rapped on the door using its tarnished brass horseshoe knocker. The door opened, and I found myself face to face with a solidly built rotund man, in his fifties. An unlit pipe hung from his lips.

“Can I help you Monsieur?”

“Do you have a son called Rene?”

He frowned and took half a step forward, blocking the doorway. “What do you want with Rene?”

“An artist called van Gogh killed himself, or so the papers say, about a kilometre from Auvers - sur - Oise. Your boys were seen with him shortly before he got himself shot. Can we talk inside?”

“My sons were in Auvers - sur - Oise.? Why would they go there?”

“I don't know. All I'm saying is those delinquents were reported being seen upsetting the artist that day.

His eyes narrowed as he continued to block my entry. “What exactly are you suggesting, Monsieur?”

I smiled, “I am not suggesting anything except that your boys may have seen something that could be useful to the case.”

“Case! What case?” he blustered.

“The death of Vincent Van Gogh, of course. I just want to speak to your son.”

The man turned to the staircase. “Rene, there's a man here to see you.”

I found myself confronted by a gangly youth around sixteen years old, with a shock of fair hair. The teenager stood near his father, arms folded.

“What do you want?” he asked nervously.

I decided to sound official. People don't tend to question your authority when you come over direct and officious. “Are you Rene Secletain?”

No answer appeared forthcoming, so I continued, “Did you and your brother spend time with the artist Vincent Van Gogh?”

He eyed me suspiciously. “Who are you and why are you asking me these questions?”

“Rene, I am investigating the circumstances of the death of the artist, Van Gogh.”

“So the lunatic is dead, is he?” Rene smirked.

I did not like this kid. “You don't sound surprised, Rene.”

“What's this about?” his father asked, becoming agitated.

"It's about Rene and his brother being seen in the company of the artist the morning of the day he got shot."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the youth said, adamantly.

Emile thrust his pipe stem at me. "What would my sons be doing with a crazy artist?"

Fed up with shilly-shallying around with this nasty teenager, I accused, "You were seen being mean to Van Gogh that morning."

"Is this true, Rene?" the father asked, very confused about the whole thing.

"We weren't doing nothing. We were just mucking around."

"Yes, Rene, mucking around with a loaded pistol."

Emile glared at his son. "Is that right?"

"I Don't know anything about it! He's as mad as that artist."

"Rene don't try denying it. A witness saw you and your brother playing at being cowboys. One of you had a pistol."

"Who is this witness?" Emile demanded.

Rene firmed his jaw and stuck to his guns. "We weren't there."

Emile addressed me. "Are you from the police, Monsieur?"

"No, I'm an independent investigator."

He poked me in the chest with the pipe stem. "Then I want you to leave this house, now."

"Monsieur Seclétain, I am merely trying to find out if your boys saw the artist shoot himself that day."

"Rene has already told you he wasn't there. Now go."

Emile closed the door. Before his boys had a chance to leave, he said, "Come here you two."

They knew what to expect. Rene gingerly approached his father, with Gaston, his younger brother, in tow. When they were in striking range, Emile caught his eldest a hard smack around his ears, the force of which nearly felled him. "How many times have I told you to leave the pistol alone?"

"We were just having some fun with it. We didn't shoot it, or anything," Gaston stated, timidly.

Emile yelled, "If I catch you two with it again it will be my belt, not my hand. Now where is it?"

"Back in your room, dad," Rene answered.

"Get it for me now."

Gaston raced upstairs and came back with the gun.

Emile smelt it. He paled, "Somebody has fired this gun." He checked the chamber. A cartridge was missing. He turned on his eldest, "What have you stupid boys done?"

Rene cowered, "It wasn't us dad. Honest."

Emile did not want to know. He glared at his sons while removing his belt.

Chapter 32

Dissatisfied with Rene's protestations of innocence, I needed to find out more about the brothers. My ruse about a witness seeing the boys with a gun would certainly have stirred up something in the Secletain household. Having found Joseph out in one lie, I wondered what else he could be keeping from me. I needed to ask Joseph what he knew about the family. I went to his usual domino playing haunt where an old man informed me the mail carrier had not finished his round. I thanked him and left.

I caught up with Joseph as he finished delivering mail to one of the many aristocratic looking townhouses, built during the Seventeenth and Nineteenth centuries.

He walked along the path to retrieve his parked bike, whistling a happy refrain. He stopped singing when he saw Oswald.

I said, "You were so helpful the last time we spoke I thought you might be able to shed some more light."

He looked at Ossie darkly. "What do you want now?" he asked, abruptly.

"Just a bit of local knowledge."

"Oh. Knowledge about what?"

"The Secletain family - what do you know about them?"

"He's a lock keeper. Why?"

"He seems very protective of his boys."

"He is their father. Why wouldn't he be?" the mail carrier shrugged.

"I think there is more to it than that. I tried Questioning Rene about the death of Vincent van Gogh and his father became Quite aggressive with me."

Joseph looked at his fob watch, a sure sign he wanted to leave. He said, "He's aggressive a lot of the time since his wife died, especially with his sons."

"Are you suggesting he's a strict authoritarian?"

"I have heard that his kids are scared of him, especially when he is the worse for the drink. Now I have to go."

"I see. Thank you, Joseph."

I did not like being given the short shrift by Emile Secletain and, although I suspected Rene tended to be economical with the truth, I couldn't prove it. This lying frustrated the hell out of me.

If only someone had recovered the weapon that would have been a big help. I wondered if the gun was in the Secletain home. I would love to have searched the premises but without a search warrant that wasn't possible. So, to pursue this line of Questioning, I would have to find another way to make Rene own up to his part in the affair. To do so, I needed to confer with the 'brains trust' – Jennifer and Nathan.

Chapter 33

The transition between my real-time experience and that of a previous point in history became easier for me. My mind adapted more quickly now and had the ability to make sense of my surroundings, as soon as I arrived in Jennifer's laboratory.

Having announced my arrival, as I entered her lounge I saw Nathan, sitting in an armchair, some distance from Jennifer. I sensed some tension between the pair. She got up and gave me a big hug. Nathan offered a begrudged, “Hi.” as though my untimely arrival had interrupted something intimate between them.

Jennifer said, “Ossie, you seem much more at ease this time.”

“I guess I'm getting used to having jumbled particles,” I grinned.

“Nathan was saying he wanted to go back to France with you.”

“Well, it is also my project,” Nathan argued.

I hadn't seen that coming. It would add further complication to my job. “Is it possible for both of us to be 'quantised' in the same space?”

“I don't know Ossie. But I don't see why not. Besides it would be an interesting experiment,” she said.

I looked at her. “An interesting experiment! Jesus Jen, this is my life we are talking about here. I'm in the middle of what is turning out to be an elaborate investigation, and you want me to have a 'passenger' with me.”

“Fucking passenger!” Nathan exploded. “I got you this gig.”

“No offence mate,” I said, trying to quieten things down. “It's just that this is not some joyride, and I'm beginning to believe foul play took place.”

“So, I could help you – as an assistant.”

My argument, being based mainly on self-interest, caused Nathan annoyance. But I couldn't let that worry me. – I didn't want anyone to cramp my style – Back in France, I walked on thin ice. Then I thought of another angle. “What if Nathan activated the Q' without me being there? I could be stranded back in the Nineteenth-Century forever!”

Instead of agreeing that such a risk was unacceptable she became animated. “What if you could each assimilate separately? After all, we know a virtual copy of the Q' can manifest at any place in space. So, as long as you both have activation keys I can't see any reason why they can't work independently of each other.”

Not happy with her thinking on this I tried diverting attention. “Yes,” I sighed, “I suppose there's some weird logic to that argument.” Then I said, “By the way, I met a strange woman. She leaves me notes where I am staying.”

Jennifer winked. “Oh, we have a Gallic crush going on. Can't let you out of our sights for a minute,” she sniggered.

“It's okay, I won't cramp your style,” Nathan said, snidely.

Ignoring his childish remark, I responded, “For your information she is Irish, and she contacts me because she claims to know something about what happened the day Vincent got shot. In fact, we are going to meet again. The weird thing is she knew I was from another time.”

Jennifer's eyes became like saucers. “How did she know that?”

I shrugged, “I have no idea.”

What did this woman say to you?”

“I don't remember it word for word but the gist of it is that I am dealing in dangerous realms and

must not make ripples in space-time.”

“Sound advice, I would say, but it's odd language for a Nineteenth-Century Woman,” Jennifer commented.

“Who is she?” Nathan asked.”

“Her name is Annie Wood.”

Jennifer got out her I pad and Googled the name. On the second page, she came up with Annie Wood Besant. She whistled through her teeth. “No wonder she had you figured, Ossie, I think you were talking with Annie Besant,”

“Annie Besant. Who's she?”

“It says here that she was a key figure in Theosophy and one of the most accomplished clairvoyants of her era.”

In a way, I experienced some relief. So she wasn't some nut job winding me up. Not that I thought that. So she really might know something and would tell me if I complied with her conditions. There seemed no need to divulge all these details to the present company. I only said, “Okay, so she may be able to shed light on this case. I have to go back and meet her again.”

Wearing her science hat, Jennifer corrected me, “Try not to think of your Q' experience as going anywhere. See it instead as being somewhere.”

Puzzled at her comment, I said, “I don't get the difference.”

She raised her eyebrows a little, then checked her attitude. “This is not time travel. There is no travelling involved. The Q is a particle assimilation device. It assimilates a particle reality according to its programming.” She gestured around her at the banks of electronic equipment. You found yourself in Nineteenth-Century France because I have done all the necessary groundwork to create mathematical algorithms that match the vibrations of that world. Now it is much simpler for you to be there again because I just have to click on the folder marked 'Death in Auvers' and activated.”

She was some woman. Beauty and brains didn't touch it. “So that means if I wanted to be somewhere else in history you would have to carry out a hell of a lot of research before I can be there.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” she said.

We all laughed at that.

Nathan said, “We still haven't discussed my part in this.”

“For you to come along at this time would create more problems for me. Maybe be we can test it out another time but not while I am carrying out this investigation.”

He turned to Jennifer. “It's your project so you make the decision,” Nathan said, trying to garner support.

She said, “Although I think it would be an exciting experiment, Ossie is the one at the coalface. It has to be his decision.”

Nathan looked darkly at me. “Then it's not going to fucking happen, is it?”

Chapter 34

I returned to Arles. That's all I can say. I had gotten to know Jennifer a little better in the two days I spent at her home. Apart from being brilliant, she had a wicked sense of humour. We relaxed and

chilled, with the help of fermented grapes. She loosened up a little and told me about her past, her failed marriage, about Emilia, her teenage daughter, who lived with her dad. Apparently, it was complicated, and Eric seemed happy to bring her up. I listened to her sad tale which caused her to weep on more than one occasion, during my stays. Luckily for me I resisted my male instinct, to comfort her and hold her close. That wasn't what she wanted. She said she didn't need to be rescued, saved, comforted and all those other things that men think of as being the answer to a woman's tears. The point is that those two days in the Twenty-first Century amounted to mere seconds in Arles.

As soon as the Q' disappeared into whatever realm quantum machines go into when not used, I untethered Scallion, who hadn't even noticed I had been gone and rode the cart back to where I had hired it. It felt odd that I was back in Nineteenth-Century France when just an instant before I was present in the Twenty-first Century. And the most bizarre aspect is that I am experiencing this without going anywhere.

As I approached Hotel Carrel, I saw a couple of the local gendarmes, a craggy middle-aged officer and a younger cocky one. One of the officers accosted me as I attempted to pass by them.

“Monsieur Doyle I presume,” The senior man said.

I turned to face them. “Yes, can I help you, officers?”

“I have here orders from the commandant for you to leave Arles and not return.”

I stared at him. “You cannot do that. I have committed no crime.”

The young man wanted to have his say. “You are carrying out an unauthorised investigation. That is against the law. You have not heeded the police warning. If you are still here when we check later today, we will arrest you.”

The senior officer glared daggers at his immature colleague but said nothing

I did not know the intricacies of French law in the 1890's. So I needed expert advice. “Are you suggesting that about I cannot carry out a private investigation on behalf of a client?”

“This is your final warning. Good day Monsieur.” the senior man concluded.

I watched as the pair of gendarmes walked away. The younger one had kept quiet after the outburst. The young Gendarme seemed fidgety and looked uncomfortable. Maybe the one issuing the orders was blustering, and young partner felt uneasy about it. There again the cocky young officer could just be new at the job. I wasn't going to let it spoil my morning promenade.

Still early in the day the streets were quiet, with little activity taking place and I had the streets largely to myself. As I walked, I listened to the rustling sound of the wind stirring up the poplars along the laneways. The aroma of fresh bread and ground coffee always stirred my senses, making life just a little more pleasant. Then I thought about Annie Besant, and I wondered if she had left another note for me at the Hotel Carrel.

Catherine, in reception, jumped when she saw me, “Monsieur, you gave me quite a start. I did not see you leave this morning, yet here you are.”

How did I explain it? Although having the ability to return to my lodgings without first leaving them held no problem for me this is an aspect Q' travel I hadn't considered. I saw how it would seem strange to Catherine Carrel. I brushed her comment aside, saying, “Something must have preoccupied you when I came through. Are there any messages for me?”

“Yes Monsieur,” she said, handing me an envelope with M. Doyle written on it. “She grinned, “I think maybe you have a mysterious fancy woman.”

It would be an acceptable reason for receiving such messages. “I laughed lightly, “So my secret is out.”

As I followed Madam Besant's instructions, I kept a wary eye out in case the gendarmes were following me. With no sign of them, I walked briskly to the bridge, on which I had first met Annie. She wasn't there. The only person standing on the bridge happened to be a man, looking into the Rhone, seemingly in deep contemplation. As I approached, he looked up, spouting unsolicited local history.

He said, “The first bridge, officially titled 'Pont de Réginel', became better known by the keeper's name as 'Pont de Langlois.'

“Oh,” I responded, completely underwhelmed.

I wonder how he would have responded if I had said that the original one gave way to a reinforced concrete structure that the retreating Germans were to blow it up in 1944. But I was in no mood to shock him or encourage his history lesson. Instead, I said, “Who are you and what makes you think I would be interested in this stuff?”

The man, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and blue blazer seemed to bear an uncanny resemblance to the dead artist. He said, “Pierre Doucan,” at your service Monsieur” He completed this with a sharp salute.

“Look, I don't wish to be rude, but I am meeting somebody here shortly, and I don't want to have to deal with you.”

I waited for his response. He just looked at me, expressionless. Then he said, “M. Besant is not meeting you here. I am to take you to her.”

I didn't like unilateral changes of the plan by others, especially when it affected me. “Wait a minute. Why the change of plan?”

“Monsieur, people are looking for her. Sick people who would do her harm. Follow me please.” He turned tail and started to walk over the bridge.

None of this made any sense to me. But to find out what was going on, I had to follow this man. What had already seemed like an extraordinary case had suddenly become much more complicated. As we crossed over the drawbridge and turned left down the tow path, I passed two fishermen checking their nets. At this point, I caught up with Pierre. “What's the problem with Madame Besant?”

He stopped. “How do you know M. Besant's name?”

I had to be careful. I could hardly say I had looked it up on Google. “Why? Is it supposed to be a secret?”

He seemed unsure how to answer me. Then he shrugged and led me along a tree-shaded path that led away from the canal. Soon we came to a small clearing with a horse and carriage. The horse, busy chewing grass, stood patiently. It felt very peaceful. All seemed silent, apart from leaves whispering to each other in the breeze. I approached the carriage. Annie Besant sat inside. She invited me to sit beside her.

“Why all the subterfuge, Madame?” I asked.

She sat, composed. “That is of no concern to you. I need your answer Monsieur.”

A lot had happened since we last met. “Please refresh my mind.”

“Very well. You are not to use any insights I may have to change the course of history in any way.

Do you know what that means?”

“I am beginning to.” I sighed heavily. “Very well I agree to your terms.”

“You are an extraordinary man Mr Doyle. Do you realise the immensity of what you are experiencing?”

“I'm an ordinary man having an extraordinary experience. Now, what do you have for me?”

She looked straight at me, as though she was searching for something within, behind my eyes. Then she took three deep breaths. After a minute, she said, “I see a young man. He is disturbed and...”

“...Disturbed! In what way?”

“Please Mr Doyle, do not interrupt me while I am trancing,” she admonished.

I considered myself berated and decided to listen.

“There is another boy with him. He is the younger one. They have a pistol. I see it more clearly, laying on the ground. It has markings on the butt. It seems to be some triangular shaped symbol. Somebody picks up the gun. I can only see the hand. The hand is calloused and has a scar from a timeworn injury that has healed over many years.”

I didn't remember seeing if Rene had such a scar but then I hadn't been looking for one. But an injury that had taken many years to heal did not sound like the hand of a young man.

Annie continued. “There is something else. The one who picked up the gun was a false friend to the artist.”

I nodded. As far as I knew neither Rene or his brother made any attempt to befriend Vincent. In fact, they were nasty towards him. Did that mean that a third person was involved in the Artist's demise?”

Annie touched my arm gently. “I hope that's helpful. That's all I'm getting.”

“This false friend you speak of ...”

“... Mr Doyle, that's it. Make of it what you will. Now I must be going, for my sake.”

“Pierre mentioned you were having trouble. Maybe I can do something to help you, in return.”

“Just keep your word. That will be help enough.”

Chapter 35

The next day, after leaving my hotel, I needed to clear my head and focus on the next part of my investigation. A leisurely stroll in the nearby countryside helped do the trick. I now had some suspects but no substantial evidence linking them to Vincent's death, which I now saw to be a capital crime. The walk was very refreshing but, unfortunately, did not offer me any further insights.

The broad-brimmed straw hat Jennifer had so thoughtfully provided me with did an excellent job of protecting my neck and shoulders from the already burning sun. Feeling refreshed and contented I enjoyed the walk back to town, past the golden wheat fields, the turning sails of windmills and scattered rural dwellings.

As I approached the main street, I saw two mounted gendarmes heading my way slowly. I thought they were just passing by, on their beat, until one of the officers reined in beside me.

He looked at a drawing in his hand, then at me. “Are you Monsieur Doyle?”

Looking up at him and said, "Yes officer. Why?"

"I am arresting you and taking you into custody."

When I got my breath back, I said, "Why. What am I supposed to have done?"

He looked down at me, his left hand on a rifle butt, projecting from a leather sheath. "If you resist arrest I will not hesitate to shoot you."

"Dammit man, I have a right to know..."

"...You will have to ask the chief. Now put your hands here so I can lock you to my saddle."

The other officer had a pistol aimed in my direction. I had no choice but to comply. My right hand was locked in a manacle attached to the saddle, and I was dragged along beside the horse. The officer who arrested me, his name was Gimeau I later learned, sat tall and proud in the saddle.

Officer Gimeau seemed very pleased with himself. He took great pleasure prodding me in the back with his rifle barrel. His bullying presented me with a conundrum. If I'd had the chance to retaliate, turn the tables on him and cause him an injury or, heaven forbid, kill him, would I be changing history, which is a no, no? So was I to just let him bully me? Surely self-survival is a good enough reason for creating a disharmonious ripple in space-time. Of course, I could always press the pendant and - Whammo! - I'm gone, leaving Officer Gimeau committed to an asylum for the insane. And even that could stuff up history, especially if M Gimeau was supposed to produce more progeny.

People looked up as we passed by. Mostly it was just cursory glances as they give little heed to my plight. I guess the townsfolk were used to the supercilious Officer Gimeau arresting people this way. Extremely embarrassed, I wished the earth would open up and swallow me. Still, as I had not committed any crimes, by English standards, I figured I could get this nonsense over and done with and soon get back on the trail.

Very little got said on the way to police headquarters, where I found myself deposited in charge of the custody officer who, having noted some of my personal details, showed me to a hot, stuffy holding cell. My pleasant stroll into Arles had quickly become a nightmare, and I still didn't know what crime I had allegedly committed. Unless upsetting Chief Amano was a gaoling offence.

After around an hour I was collected from my cell and taken to an interrogation room, where, in charge of Officer Gimeau, I was made to sit on an uncomfortable wooden chair.

"What am I here for?" I asked.

"To be questioned," the gendarme replied.

"About what?" Now I was becoming concerned.

Just then the door burst open and in strode Chief Amano. He swept into the room, dragged out the only other chair and planted himself heavily upon it. "So, Monsieur Doyle, you never took my warning seriously."

"Why have I been arrested?" I asked, getting straight to the point.

"You have been brought here for questioning, Monsieur Doyle."

"About what, for God's sake," I vented, in frustration and fear.

"The murder of Pierre Doucan."

I felt as though Niagra Falls had hit me in the face. "Pierre Doucan was killed?"

“As you well know, Monsieur, as you were the last person to see him alive.”

My mind was racing, keeping up with my thumping heart. “No. You've got it wrong. The Lady he took me to saw him after me. He was this woman's driver.”

“So you admit you met with him?” Amano said, looking at me as though I were a fish on his hook.

“Yes, I met him yesterday, on Langlois Bridge. He took me to see a woman. I don't know what happened to him after that because I left them and came back to town.”

Joseph Amano leant towards me. “What woman are you talking about?”

I was reluctant to name her. “A woman who said she had some evidence to do with the Van Gogh case.”

“And who is this woman?”

“Just somebody who left me a message to meet her. It was a waste of time.”

He slapped his hands down on a table between us. “Who is this woman,” he demanded. “You must tell me. We need to speak with this 'mystery' woman.”

I sighed heavily. I didn't want to rat on M. Besant, but my liberty was at risk. “Her name is Annie Wood.” Well, that's what she told me and I figured she might not want her real name known, especially if someone was after her.

“This Annie Wood, where can we find her?”

I shrugged, “I have no idea. I only spoke to the woman yesterday.”

He looked up at me. “Monsieur Doucan was found fatally stabbed this afternoon, and you were the last known person to see him alive. So I think you should try harder, Monsieur Doyle.”

“This is ridiculous!” I blurted, “You cannot possibly think I had anything to do with...”

Amano sneered, “...But I do think that, Monsieur. And I am arresting you for the murder of Pierre Doucan.”

My spine became ice. “This is preposterous Amano. I had nothing to do with this.”

He stared at me. “Let me explain something to you Monsieur Doyle. I am in charge of investigations here and amateurs are not welcome.”

“But I have new evidence and ...”

“... I am not interested in your testimony,” he spat scornfully. “You have no jurisdiction here.” He stood up, puffing out his chest. “See where your amateur meddling has gotten you?”

“You can't just ...”

“... Oh but I can just,” he sneered. Then he ordered, “Gimeau, escort the prisoner back to his cell.”

Marched back to my confinement my mind raced. I could not believe Amano had just charged me with murder. Total ludicrous but true, none-the-less.

Sitting in my hot cell, wondering what the hell I could do to convince the police of my innocence, I wondered if the carriage driver's death had anything to do with whoever pursued Annie Besant. As I had no idea about who might be following her or why they were doing so, my preponderances only amounted to imagination and day dreaming. At least this mindful preoccupation kept my mind active and not on my unfortunate predicament.

More than once my fingers hovered over the pendant around my neck. It would be so simple to disappear and leave the cops with a baffling mystery. But the detective in me wanted to find out who did kill the driver. But how on earth could I do that? Now I did need legal advice!

Later, when a gendarme brought me food I said, "I have information for Chief Amano about the murder. I need to speak with him."

The senior, slightly dishevelled officer, said, "He has left for the day. You will have to wait until tomorrow."

This guy did not look like a career copper. He looked to be in his fifties and still on the bottom rung of the promotions ladder. Just a run-of-the-mill cop was just waiting for his pension; probably not exactly a stickler for the rules. I said, "I need to speak with an advocate. Can you arrange this for me?"

He eyed the notes I held out. "This is bribery, Monsieur, he said, shunning away, but with a gleam in his eye."

"No, it's not, I smiled. "Officer, what is your name?"

"Paul Gardet, Monsieur."

Proffering the money, I said, "It's for services rendered. Just get me an advocate."

Gardet delivered and around nine pm Valerie Poussant, a lawyer, appeared at my cell. He was a swarthy fellow sporting a handlebar moustache and mutton-chop whiskers; he set down his leather satchel. "Monsieur Doyle, how can I be of service to you?" he asked, genially.

"By getting me out of this hell hole, for a start."

He stared through his spectacles at my arrest report. "It says here that you killed Pierre Doucan, a Phaeton driver."

"Yes, on no evidence. The chief has it in for me."

He stared at me for a moment, then rubbed his left sideburn, looking thoughtful. "I have known Chief Amano for many years. "Why do you think he has it in for you?"

"He didn't like me carrying out a private investigation into the death of Vincent Van Gogh."

"That would not be a good enough reason for him to arrest you for murder, Monsieur. If it were for personal reasons, a much lesser charge would be more likely to stick."

What he said made sense but the murder charge did not. "He said I was the last person to see the man before his death. But that's not true."

"Who then?"

"The murderer, of course."

"Quite Monsieur. So why did you meet with this - he glanced at the report - Pierre Doucan?"

"I didn't exactly meet with him. I mean I had an appointment with - a woman."

He grinned. Well, at least his mouth made some movement underneath his obscuring moustache. He winked, "And Pierre did not like this arrangement, perhaps?"

I did not like the implication. "It wasn't like that. This woman waited in Doucan's phaeton. He took me to see her."

"I see. Now, this woman. What was the reason for your rendezvous with this Lady?"

“Like I said, I'm investigating the death of the artist, Vincent Van Gogh. Annie Wood said she had information for me about the case.”

“Then what happened, Monsieur?”

“She gave me some information. Then I left them both and walked back towards town.”

“So you are saying this woman would have been the last person to see him alive.”

“I have no idea what happened after I left.” I fixed Valerie in my gaze. “Monsieur Poussant, all I know is that I am innocent, and I need you to get me out of here.”

“So, you wish to hire me as your advocate Monsieur Doyle?”

I had no idea what he charged for his services, but he looked like my best chance of getting out of this stinking Gaol. “Yes, Monsieur I wish to hire you.”

“I will need a fee of five hundred francs, Monsieur, payable up front.”

I gulped. I didn't have that amount on me, but I did not want to lose the lawyer's services. I smiled, warmly. “I will arrange it for when you come back.”

He stood up. “Excellent, Monsieur. I shall return here in the morning.”

“In the morning! You mean you're not getting me out tonight?” I said, feeling quite indignant and thinking I had every right to be so.

“Relax Monsieur and try to get some rest. You will need all your energy for tomorrow.”

Now, left alone in my cell, I had to manifest the five hundred francs. The only way to achieve this trick is for me to take a trip forward to my present time and get the money I needed. Even more pressing I needed to know who killed the Phaeton driver so that I could get myself off the hook. It amazed me that I could be there and back before anyone missed me. I took a deep breath and pressed the crystal.

Chapter 36

I found myself back in Jennifer's laboratory. The Quantime had become as familiar to me as my old Ford Fiesta. I always felt protected and secure inside the pumpkin. And I now hesitated before leaving my cocoon. For a moment or two, when stepping out of the device, it seemed as though I were venturing into an unknown alien environment. Then a thought occurred to me. I wondered if I could emerge in the Twenty-first Century somewhere else, other than Jennifer's laboratory.

Although the whole Q' experience is quite amazing and totally unreal, I had no control as to where and when I would be, without Jennifer programming the data into the Quantime. Without her, I would not be experiencing this fantastic adventure. I began to see why Nathan was so in awe of her.

As I opened the door of the laboratory, I realised that I was in her private space. I felt uncomfortable about just bursting in on her. As I was back in my own time, everything seemed back to normal, including my mobile phone. Oh, how much easier it would be if they'd had cell phones back in Vincent's time. I rang her number. When I heard her voice, I went weak at the knees. It wasn't just the effect she had on me. I only said, “I'm back.” Then a bout of exhaustion hit me.

Chapter 37

I awoke to the sound of a voice, a female voice. It took me a while to register.

“So, you're awake at last.”

I opened my eyes and saw Jennifer standing by the bed, a cup of tea in her hand.

“Ossie, you've been dead to the world for hours. What happened?”

I dragged myself, groggily, into sitting position. “How long have I been out?”

“At least 14 hours. You were utterly exhausted. What happened to cause that?”

I don't know exactly. Maybe the stress of being thrown into gaol and charged with murder. Yes, that would do it. But I wasn't ready to grill about that. “I don't know, Jennifer. It hasn't happened to me before.”

Jennifer's brow creased a little. She slowly shook her head in puzzlement. “I don't know either but we haven't carried out enough experiments to recognise any patterns concerning your energy levels.”

“Well, I guess it's time I got up and faced the real world,” I said, getting out of bed.

Jennifer turned away. “Okay, meet me in the lounge when you are ready, Ossie. We have a lot of stuff to go over.”

As we relaxed in her lounge, I asked, “How is it possible that I can space travel from there to here, spend some time here, yet no time has passed back there?”

Jennifer sat back and placed her coffee mug on a tray. “I know this is difficult, but you need to get a grasp on this. The Q' responds to my programming. I tell it where and when to be, plus a whole load of other stuff that needs to be simplified. To understand this Q' stuff you have to forget the whole concept of time. I know that we are programmed to run according to clocks and calendars, but we have to get over it. You have to think regarding space, not time. Are you with me so far?”

I nodded and listened to this extraordinary woman.

“Okay, now space is not space at all, in the sense of it being empty. It only seems empty to us because we cannot see what fills it.”

“Energy.”

“Right. And this energy can either act like waves or particles. Now this is the thing. Inside the Q' it is wave reality. I am simplifying it somewhat. But I am talking about potential. In other words, the Q' is potentially able to be anywhere instantly. Now think of the enormity of what I'm saying.”

I took a deep breath. It was impressive, scary, exciting, disorienting, unreal, and all the other words to describe the indescribable. I summed it up with “WOW!”

“Wow indeed. However, the Q' is not all that smart because I have to give it instructions, which it follows to the nth degree.”

I look at her. “Okay, that's the science stuff now I need to deal with the real stuff, life stuff.”

She looked a bit hurt at first. Then Jennifer said, “Of course, Ossie. How goes the adventure?”

The story could wait. I needed to get to the crux. “I need to be able to control the Q'.”

She shook her head. “No, it can't be done.”

“Why not?”

“Apart from the fact that you will need at least a basic degree in computer science, programming and masters in theoretical physics, it has to be controlled from here.”

I looked her in the eye. “Jennifer, I am in a French gaol, charged with murder.” That got her

undivided attention.

She sat there silent, open-mouthed. Eventually, she uttered, “But how? What?”

“Never mind the details for now. Unless I can find out who committed the crime...”

“... Who are you supposed to have murdered?”

“The point is that I need to redirect, or have you redirect the Q', somehow.”

“Ossie, this is serious. Tell me exactly what happened.”

“Serious! No shit, Sherlock! I am in a cell, in the Arles lock-up, ready to be transported to Paris for trial. I realised I needed some money to pay a lawyer. That's when I activated the Q'.”

Jennifer, puzzled, said, “Then don't go back.”

“If I don't return to my gaol cell it's going to fuck up history. Warp the space-time continuum, or whatever.”

She nibbled her bottom lip. Then she said, “Yes, but if you go to trial that's also going to make a difference to history.”

“How do we know that?” I queried, tentatively. We don't know about everything that went on back then.”

“Exactly! So how do you know avoiding prison is going to change history.”

“Dammit Jen, I'm confused enough already, without laying that on me.”

Jennifer got up and took the mugs into the kitchen.

I followed her. “Jennifer, I have to prove my innocence. To do so, I have to be witness to the murder. To be witness to the crime, I need to know the where and when of the of the incident. Isn't there some way in which we can communicate through space assimilation?”

She rinsed the mugs and turned to face me. “What's the name of the victim?”

“Pierre something. Damn. I'm losing my memory of it.”

“Ossie, I must have the name.”

“Let me think. Okay. Pierre. Esau. Not that's not it. Let me see - big-beaked bird.”

“What are you on about?”

“Ah, Toucan. Toucan, Toucan? Yes, Doucan. Pierre Doucan.”

“Well done. Now I have something to work with,” Jennifer smiled. “Now any other details?”

“He drove a Phaeton and knew Annie Besant,” I answered, exhausting my knowledge on the subject.

“We'll see what we can work out from that.”

Chapter 38

That evening we dined together. Jennifer came into the dining room looking very sexy. Her dark blue short skirt and cream scoop neckline blouse gave me a pleasant surprise. It was a change from the track pants and loose sweaters she normally wore around her home. She looked damn good in her baggy pants and sloppy Joe, but now she looked quite ravishing. I'd been busy in the kitchen, rustling up some spaghetti and chicken when she flounced in. I looked at this beautiful, stunning

vision. "Wow, you look great!"

She smiled, "So, master chef, what's cooking? I'm starving."

As we ate, we talked about us, family, childhoods, careers, relationships, dreams, desires, etc. I felt very close to Jen. What an enjoyable evening, just the two of us enjoying a simple meal and a very pleasant Shiraz.

She said, "I haven't had such excellent company for a long time, Ossie. You're an attractive guy."

"Interesting," I grinned, feigning insult. How about handsome, courageous, funny and all that stuff?"

She laughed, "You forgot to add 'extremely modest' to your list of attributes."

Although we had just enjoyed a relaxed meal together, there was an electrical instant when our eyes met over the table - met - for a moment, for eternity. My basic male instincts overrode the emotional entanglement; lust overtook from love. I said, "Jennifer when I get back I want to take you to dinner."

Then she said something that totally knocked me for six.

"Fuck dinner. Let's go to bed."

I was gob-smacked. "Are you granting a condemned man his last wish?"

"Don't even joke about it."

I rose to my feet on wobbly legs and took her in a fierce embrace. My god, I was going to make love with this beautiful woman. We kissed deeply, hardly coming up for breath. We were in her living room, in each other's arms, her soft, warm body straining against me. I felt my penis becoming enlarged and sensed her breath quickening in response. Of course, I had no idea how sexually active she was, but I figured that her options, in her closed scientific world, were probably limited. She turned out to be a bit sexually frustrated and outright horny. And I had the wildest night of my life.

Being in a strange bed and sleeping with a new woman, I woke up briefly at various times through the night. I finally woke up when with light trying to sneak through the blinds, only to feel a very pleasant sensation between my legs, which just had to best way to wake up. I lay there savouring her ministrations for a little while before she realised I was awake. She continued for a little bit longer, then she climbed on top, straddling me. I reached for her breasts as she mounted me, causing both of us to moan. In this state of ecstasy, all thoughts of being charged with murder were understandably and temporarily forgotten.

Chapter 39

I climbed into the Q' with some trepidation that day. Why the hell didn't I give up on the case and just spend the day with her? It could have been my ego wanting to solve the mystery, or it could have been that I wished to honour my commitment to Theo. I wasn't sure why, but some dominant force urged me back to France to continue with this investigation. I felt like one of the WW2 pilots waving goodbye to his girlfriend, just before heading off on a dangerous mission.

Jennifer had managed to put some data together which might just allow me to manifest at the scene of the crime. I figured if I could witness the murder - a gruesome thought - I would be able to lead the police to the culprit. Therein lies a problem. I would also have to reappear in the gaol cell with, or without, visiting this present time. To Achieve this, the 'Q' would-would have two separate codes programmed into it at the same time. Jennifer didn't think it possible but did manage to tweak the programming to give it a go.

Chapter 40

As soon as I pressed the crystal and the Q' disappeared, I found myself back in 19th Century France, in a wooded area, somewhere just north-west of Arles. It took a few moments for me to orientate myself. The position of the sun showed that it was early afternoon. It was seasonably hot, and the sparse arboreal shade gave me a little relief from the heat of the sun. As I had no idea where the murder had taken place, Jennifer couldn't programme the 'Q' to that particular location. So I had arrived a day after the incident to find out what had happened. The local newspaper headlined the story, from which I learned the where and when of the crime. A farmer had found Pierre Doucan's body on Ave de Beaucaire. According to the attending physician, the victim died around noon. The article mentioned the Arles gendarmes had arrested a suspect who was helping them with their enquiries. I was slightly amused at that comment.

As I approached Ave de Beaucaire, at 11:52 am, I heard raised voices. Using the limited tree cover I edged myself forward to see what was happening. Doucan's phaeton stood parked by the road, next to a one horse trap. A violent struggle ensued between two men – the altercation involved Doucan and a man I did not know. I moved forward, trying to catch what they were saying. Despite their raised voices and my perfect grasp of the French language, I could hardly make sense of their arguing. I did hear Doucan say, “You cannot do that Gilles.” At least I had a name. Then I saw Gilles, the bigger of the two, brandish a long knife that glinted in the sunlight. What happened next took my breath away. From my hiding place, bush, mere metres from the argument, I saw Gilles plunge his knife deep into Doucan's chest. He stabbed him twice more before the carriage driver fell to the ground, dead, blood oozing from his fatal wounds. Witnessing this brutal murder felt bad enough but what I saw next horrified me even more. I froze on the spot when I saw the calloused scarred hand that grasped the hilt of the dagger.

Could it be possible there was more than one local manual worker with calluses and a long scar on the back of their right hand? Could there be a connection between this murder and the death of Vincent Van Gogh? If so what was that connection? My mind, full of questions, cried out for answers. But they had to be shelved for now. The time had come to put the experiment to the test. I had to board the Q' and see if it would take me back to gaol. “Here goes,” I mouthed, applying pressure to the crystal.

The Q' did its thing and, in a flash, I found myself back in my cell. I secretly praised Jennifer for her astounding genius and took a quick mental trip to the night we had just spent together. Despite the happy experience, the details were fading. Perhaps, with mental training, my recall of events in both space zones would become much clearer. I must ask Jennifer about this.

Shaken from my reverie, I heard footfalls approaching my cell. Officer Gardet, the night warden, came up to my door and peered in at me. “Monsieur Doyle, you should get some sleep.”

“How can I sleep with these false charges hanging over my head?”

He shrugged, “There is nothing you can do now Monsieur. Chief Amano will question you in the morning. It is best that you are refreshed to survive his interrogation.”

It seemed all too daunting. For the first time, doubt crept in, and I felt completely helpless. Of course playing the Q' card, always an option, was my ultimate get-out-of-gaol-free ticket. But I needed to stick to my case.

Chief Amano appraised me after perusing the report. I had been sitting in the interview room since ten thirty am. It took another hour for the police chief to show. Feeling stiff and tired after a sleepless night in the cell my mood became darker by the minute.

He kept repeating the same tired questions, with me supplying the same testing answers. Eventually, more out of frustration and anger, than curiosity I asked, "Where's the proof that I committed this crime?"

The police chief ignored me, saying, "Did you and Monsieur Doucan have an argument over Madame Wood?"

"I have already told you we did not have an argument. I didn't know the man, and had not even met him until he spoke to me, on the bridge."

He tried cracking a smile. "It wouldn't be the first time that men have fought with each other and even killed over a woman."

I sighed heavily and looked over at Valerie Poussant, who had said very little since the questioning began. I turned to the police chief. "That's not what happened. I did not know Madame Wood and only consulted her on a professional basis."

"Why then did you attack and stab Pierre Doucan?"

"I did not kill him. I had not met the man until that morning. Why the hell can't you believe me?"

Valerie spoke up. "Chief Amano, my client has said, repeatedly, that he had nothing to do with this crime. Unless you have evidence to the contrary, you have to let him go."

Amano stared fiercely at the advocate. "Monsieur Poussant, I know the law." The chief then turned to me. "You say you met Monsieur Doucan for the first time Yesterday. And you say he took you to Annie Wood, whom you had arranged to meet."

"Yes." At last, I seemed to be getting through to him.

He continued. "You say when you left Monsieur Doucan he was alive."

"Yes, that's correct," I answered, gaining hope.

"You also say you never laid eyes on him again. Is that right, Monsieur Doyle?"

"Again, Yes."

The chief grinned at my council and me. "Then why do we have an eyewitness who saw you and Pierre Doucan arguing near his carriage later yesterday. He then saw you plunge a dagger repeatedly into the victim's chest."

My blood chilled, and I felt a cold sweat break out. "But that's impossible. It's a case of mistaken identity. I didn't do it."

"Are you denying that you were not at the scene of the crime when the murder took place?"

I sat stunned. So far I had stuck to the truth, my best form of defence. But how could I explain I saw the man called Gilles stab Pierre? An important detail I could not reveal.

Valerie said, "Chief de Amano, in the light of this new evidence I would like to confer with my client privately."

Astounded, I spluttered, "New Evidence! The false evidence you mean! Who is this witness?" I demanded.

Chief Amano again ignored me, but he did agree to my advocate's request.

As we sat alone, Valerie said, "Now they have an eyewitness do you want to change your story?"

I stared at him. "No, I do not! Besides, I have some information on the real murderer."

“Are you still maintaining that..?”

“...You are not listening to me Monsieur Poussant. The man they should be looking for has a jagged scar on his right hand. He also has callused hands, probably from manual labour of some sort.”

He looked at me, his face a question mark. “How do you know this?”

“Is this in the strictest confidence?”

“Monsieur, I would not divulge anything you wish to stay private between us.”

“I witnessed the murder taking place.”

He sat up straight. “Why did you not put this in your statement to the police?”

“It's complicated. But it means that the police eyewitness is lying. We need to know who this liar is.”

“Impossible, I am afraid, Monsieur Doyle. What I am interested in is how you came to be at the scene of the murder?”

“I cannot answer that.”

“Taking this attitude does not help your case. Assuming what you say is true, why would anybody want to frame you for the murder, especially if this witness also saw who carried out this terrible act?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea. I'm new around here and have no enemies.”

“Then it is indeed puzzling, Monsieur.”

I looked at him. “Can you find out who this scarred man is?”

“Of course, I will try to locate him. But, apart from the scar I have nothing much to go on.”

Then I remembered something. “Oh, his first name is Gilles.”

Valerie smiled weakly. “That does narrow the field a little.”

I grabbed his arm, as he rose to leave. “Valerie, you have to get me out of here.”

“That's going to be a problem, Monsieur. They are planning to transport you to Paris this very day.”

My heart sank.

Chief de Amano, very cockily, entered the interrogation room. He thrust pen and paper in front of me.

“What's this for?” I queried.

“Your full confession, of course. Now don't waste my time.”

“I confess that I have omitted some relevant information.”

“That's a start. What is it?”

“The man who killed Monsieur Doucan has a callused right hand with a jagged scar on the back.”

He looked at me, nonplussed. “How could you possibly know the key witness has a scarred right hand?”

Now, puzzled, I said, “I'm talking about the murderer, not your witness!”

He looked at me blankly. "Monsieur, I don't know what game you are playing, but the eyewitness has such a scar."

Then it hit me like a tonne of bricks. The alleged eye-witness was the murderer. The revelation excited me. I blurted out. "Your eyewitness is the killer - not I!"

The Chief laughed, "You must be very desperate, Monsieur to try to suck me in."

"I am. But because you have falsely accused me."

"Nonsense!" Amano spat. "How could the eye witness know such intimate details if he did not see your murderous act?"

"Because he was there all right - stabbing M Doucan."

"He says he saw you stabbing the deceased."

Becoming exasperated, I leant towards him. "How else would I know about his scar?"

Chief Amano's became a question mark. For the first time, since the interrogation had begun, he seemed unsure of his position. It was time to make him more so. I pressed my advantage. "How else would I know he has calluses on his hands?"

"It could be a lucky guess. Lots of men have calluses on their hands."

There just seemed to be no convincing him. Then I played my ace. "Okay, so how do I know his name is Gilles?"

The Chief Gendarme stopped in his tracks. Perhaps this troublesome Irishman was telling the truth. "Very well, Monsieur Doyle, where were you at the time of the murder?"

"What time would that be?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

He consulted the report. "The doctor puts the attack around midday, Monsieur."

"Hm, let me think. I could hardly say I was getting it on with a beautiful woman in England in 2012. I could also hardly say I witnessed the murder taking place. I settled for, "I was walking at the time, back to town."

"Did you see or speak to anyone on the way?"

"I don't remember doing so."

"So you don't have an alibi."

"It would appear not. But if I were the killer I would have made sure I had a solid alibi."

Amano became pensive, unsure whether to believe my story or not. I prompted, "You have his details. Bring him in. I know the questions to ask him."

He looked at me fiercely, "If there is any questioning to be done I will do it, Monsieur."

Chapter 41

Jennifer felt angry and agitated. It was three days since Ossie had assimilated with no sign of his return. His instructions were to check in and report daily. The fact that he told her he had been arrested by the French police, on a murder charge, did not help. She couldn't pin down the reason for her concern. After all, they had only spent one night together, so it wasn't as though she had any deep emotional feelings for him. Besides, anything to do with Q' experiments had to be purely professional. Personal feelings could not come into it.

The rational part of her brain said this. However, she had become fond of Ossie. And he figured as the central part of her quantum experiments. Even so, her emotions, a mixture of anger and worry, had her confused. What if something had gone wrong? How would she know? True, she could recall the Q' any time she pleased, but she didn't know how it would affect Ossie. Would it leave him stranded wherever? Or would it grab him because of his part in the programming?

She sighed heavily; there were too many imponderables. Jennifer was tempted to recall the device. Her finger hovered over the auto return button. At least the result would answer the question for her. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. If Ossie had become stranded in Nineteenth-Century France, he would surely do something that would violate the rules of space-time travel. She couldn't have that on her conscience. She would also feel guilty should anything bad happen to him, because of her experiment.

As the Q' physically remained in her laboratory all the time, with Ossie's version, a holographic copy, by comparison, it could assimilate any model in any space. Bearing this in mind Jennifer was unsure what to do. There were too many imponderables.

Shaken from her reverie, by a knock at the door, she asked, "Who's there?"

"It's only me – Nathan," came the voice through the letter box.

Pleased to have a good friend to share with, she smiled broadly and gave him a big hug. "It's great to see you."

Enjoying the closeness, he said, "I'll have to come more often if this is your response."

"Can't guarantee it would happen every time. It's just that I'm concerned that Ossie hasn't checked in for three days."

So that's it, he thought. And Jenny calls him Ozzie now. He would have to make his move soon. "Oh!" he responded.

"His instructions included checking in every day, not just turning up when he sees fit," she complained.

"Maybe there is a good reason for his behaviour. After all, we don't know what's happening with him, do we?"

She turned on him. "Nathan, I'm not looking for a fix here. I'm just having a bitch."

"I haven't known you to be like this before."

"So," she retorted. "What's that got to do with anything?"

Male instinct took effect, and Nathan decided the hole he was digging was big enough. "How about we have a brew?"

They sat on her patio, drinking tea. A slight breeze stirred up some fallen leaves. Sparrows freshened up in the stone bird bath. Turning to Jennifer, he said, "I feel relaxed here with you." Nathan ventured.

"I am not feeling very relaxed," Jennifer stated, sipping her tea.

He patted her on her wrist. "I'm sure he's safe and sound."

She glared at him. "How dare you treat me like some fucking little girl that needs consoling. And what makes you think it's about him. It's the way the programme is going that concerns me."

Nathan rounded on her. "Quit the fucking attitude, or I'm out of here."

“What's that. Some threat. You don't have to stay if you don't want to.”

Things weren't going the way Nathan had envisaged. “Christ, Jennifer, what's happening to us,” he said, thrusting his chair back, rising to leave.

“What do you mean - us? You make it sound as though we're some old married couple.”

Nathan grinned, then laughed.

Jennifer burst out laughing as well. Then she said, “This doesn't mean I am not still pissed off with you.”

Nathan became contrite. Sure his male ego felt a bit bruised but she was worried and, as a friend, he ought to be in her corner. “So what are you going to do about Ossie?” he asked, sitting down again.

“Perhaps it's time to activate auto return.” she said to no one in particular.”

“Yes, I guess that's one way to do it.”

She chewed her bottom lip, an affectation that showed she was in two minds about something. “I've never done that before. I'm concerned what might happen.”

“So what could go wrong?”

Feeling more in her comfort zone, Jennifer donned her quantum physicist hat. “He could be left stranded in Nineteenth-Century France. Then there's the murder charge hanging over him. However, it's possible that the Q' will not assimilate to this space-time without him if it reads him as part of the package.”

“Does that matter, seeing as the original Q' doesn't move from here.”

“Damn it, Nathan, I can't wait any longer.” She rose and headed for her lab, purpose in her step.

Nathan, tagging along, said, “Well, I guess the time has come.”

Seething inside, she responded, “Just wait until I get hold of him.”

“Perhaps we should give him a chance to explain himself, first.”

“He has no right to abuse my trust in him in this way.”

“I know, Jen, We'd better do it,” Nathan responded, looking for ways to earn brownie points with her, after his outburst.

They entered her secret lab. Jennifer went straight to her Quantime computer program and, before she had the chance to change her mind, clicked on the auto-return icon. The holographic copy of the Quantime morphed with its material counterpart and instantly manifested in the laboratory. But the door did not open, as before.

Nathan moved gingerly towards the machine. Oswald Doyle was sitting inside, hardly moving a muscle. He sat staring straight ahead, a blank look in his eyes. “Oswald,” Nathan said, “Can you hear me?” He did not reply. Turning to Jennifer, he said “He's not responding. What have we done?”

Jennifer came forward and looked at the inert space traveller. “I don't think it is anything serious. It would probably be best to leave him there until he comes around.”

“But it looks as though he is in a coma. We ought to get medical help.”

She rounded on him. “And say what? His condition has resulted from his space assimilation experience!” she retorted, scornfully.

Nathan let it ride. "Well, we have to do something."

Jennifer, deep in thought, said, "It could have been the shock of finding himself in the machine against his will?"

"You're the expert, Jen." Nathan said, throwing his hands in the air.

"I know that," She said brusquely, "but nothing like this has ever happened before."

"True, but you've never pulled the plug before."

"I had to. Ossie hasn't made contact with me for three days."

"Look, Jen, I'm not blaming you." Nathan then asked, "Is it possible that he could have been in this condition before you brought him back. I mean, if he went unconscious could you still get him to come back?"

"I don't know, Nathan. it's all bloody confusing."

Nathan paced around the lab. "Jen, we have to do something!"

"Calm down Nathan. If he is in a coma, there is nothing a hospital can do that we can't do here."

"We should at least make him comfortable in bed."

I slowly regained consciousness. I partially opened my eyes to blinding light and blinked a few times, wondering what had happened? Like the feeling of grogginess slowly subsided I realised I was in a room, in bed - not mine. Makeup on the dresser told me I was probably in a woman's bedroom. How did that happen? Where am I? Fragments of memory were trying to assemble a jigsaw in my mind. I remembered prison cell. Then a vague recollection of being in some device but didn't know how I accessed it. The rest was blank, except Jennifer! I just had to see her. I got out of bed and stumbled, on wobbly legs, to the bedroom door. Propping myself against the doorpost, I yelled, "IS ANYBODY THERE?"

I heard the sound of people running.

"At last, you're back in the land of the living," Nathan said, relieved. He then helped me to a comfortable chair, and Jennifer made me some strong sweet tea.

Recognising Jennifer, I asked "What happened? One minute I'm in a gaol cell and the next I find myself here in the Quantime. I never activated the crystal."

"That's because I brought you back." she answered, firmly.

"You brought me back! Why?"

"Because you had gone three days without checking in and we were becoming worried about you," she answered.

"You were worried, so you nearly killed me."

"Nonsense! You're Okay, aren't you?"

"No thanks to you," I said, accusingly and perhaps a little unfairly. "You had no idea what effect forcefully pulling me back would have on me."

"We do now." Nathan Quipped.

Failing to see the humour, I retorted, "That's not the point!"

"No," she responded, "The point is that you never followed our arrangement. The one that you

check in each day, even if for just a fleeting visit.”

My anger subsided. “Okay Jennifer, you have a point, but I'm fighting for my liberty and probably my life, back there. Isn't there some way I can check in without coming back each time?”

“I am working on a portable programmer but its early days yet. So, in the meantime, you will just have to check in each day.”

“Sure,” Ollie said, reluctantly.

“Just make sure you do.”

“Sure.”

She looked at me. “If this experiment is going to work we have to be absolutely on the same page. I have to be able to trust that you will do as I say or I will have to find another subject.”

Her words hit me like a cold splash of water in my face. Caught up in the adventure, I forget I was part of a bizarre but critical scientific experiment. “Okay, I may have been a bit cavalier about this but ...”

“... Yes, you have, and I'm glad you have now seen it. Now go home and get some rest; I'll see you back here tomorrow, around midday.”

Chapter 42

The ringing sound in my head began competing with the mad artist chasing after me through a field of multicoloured wheat. The ringing persisted and managed to bore into my conscious mind. My hand thrust out to grab the phone. I leant outward, tumbled off the couch onto the floor. “Hey, who is this?” I asked, having got the receiver somewhere in the vicinity of my ear.

“Tony Baddick.”

I cringed at the name.

“Have you found my dog yet?”

The lost greyhound. Bloody hell! I'd been too busy with the Van Gogh case to follow it up, but I couldn't tell him that. “Not yet, but I am following some leads.” If that the dog had been on one he wouldn't have gone AWOL in the first place. I didn't say that either, preferring to keep all my limbs in their proper place.

“I'm not paying you to piss around, Doyle. I want results, or it's your head.”

I gulped. With Tony Baddick such a threat was literal.

“I'm coming around your office, so make sure you're in.”

“I'm out all morning.” I'll be out all century, with a bit of luck, but I didn't tell Tony that either.

“You'd better not be out at four this afternoon. And you'd better find out where my dog is.”

Tony Baddick always spelt bad news. I hadn't wanted to take the case on, but he became insistent. And when he gets insistent he 's hard to say no to, if you don't want to end in traction. I knew this case would end up in grief – mine. Who the fuck cares about a lost dog? Well, Tony Baddick did, as the dog belonged to him. It's a greyhound called Springer. Worse still it's a bloody champion, and Tony had paid an arm and a leg for it. Knowing his form, the thief would probably lose the same, should Tony or his thugs get their hands on him. When Tony became annoyed, it didn't take much nous to know the best move is to keep out of his way. It was wise to create as much distance as possible between him and any bones you didn't want breaking. And I had to tell him face-to-face I

had not found his dog. Shit!

The day had not started off well. If only I hadn't pissed Jennifer off I could have stayed at her place. But that couldn't be undone, and now I had nowhere to turn. Nathan had seemed peeved about something and hadn't offered me a bed, which is how I ended up on my moth-eaten office couch, getting an earful from Bad Tony. I seemed to be pissing everyone off these days.

Back in my copper days, I had the occasional flutter on the doggies. During that time, I had become pals with Freddie Turbot, a White City Stadium official. He knew most of what went on in the greyhound world, especially anything to do with his track. Despite being busy, he made himself available for a quick pint at the Bricklayers Arms in Whitehart Lane. Freddie, who always put me in the mind of a mole, what with his pointy nose and thick lenses, shook his head and tutted. "Ossie, mate, Bad boy Baddick is not the sort of bloke you want to piss off."

"Tell me something I don't know, like who is likely to have dog-napped Springer."

He sucked the froth off his beer. "I 'aven't heard of anybody doing somethin' that mental."

"Christ mate, he coming round to my office this afternoon."

He tutted. "Why the hell did you take him on in the first place?"

"That is not helpful, mate. Look, if only I can make some headway."

He leant forward towards me. "This didn't come from me, right. I overheard something that may shed a bit of light."

"I'm all ears."

"Well, There's no love lost between Bad Tony and the 'Hammer'. Everybody knows that, but they mostly keep their distance, But there is an on-going feud. Apparently, it goes back to their fathers' day when they each competed to rule the manor. I 'ears Frank 'ead said 'e knew 'ow to hurt Tony. Masher Mulligan said somethin' like, "Yeah, 'e loves 'is fuckin' dog."

Gob-smacked did not cut it. Frank Head, known locally as 'Hammer Head' is an even nastier piece of work than Tony Baddick, if that's possible. "So you reckon the Hammer pinched his dog."

"You join the dots mate. But don't involve me. Don't breathe a fuckin' word – right?"

I tapped the side of my nose. "Right."

I phoned Jennifer. She said she was feeling more relaxed and invited me round. The time displayed eleven thirty am, so I had plenty of time before meeting with Tony Baddick.

When I arrived at her place Nathan opened the door. He stood there, barefoot, in track pants, looking really at home. "Hi Nathan, is Jennifer in?"

He yelled, "JEN, OSWALD'S HERE."

Wearing her bathrobe, her hair wrapped in a towel, she gave me a big hug, turning me on sexually. I wished Nathan wasn't there.

She smiled, "Give me time to get myself together; then I'll send you back to France."

Chapter 43

As I sat in my small cell, all thought of Tony Baddick's dog evaporated. As did any concerns I had about Nathan and Jennifer. Hell, they had been close friends for years. So what right did I have to

claim caveman rights over the scientist? Sure we'd had sex once. So what, it's no big deal. But getting an out-of-gaol card - is.

So as not to feel so helpless I thought the of many things that gave me an advantage over my gaolers. First, I could come and go as I choose, unbeknown to them. Secondly, I can assimilate in another time space reality without them knowing it. This process allowed me to stretch time in such a way that I could take time in another space-time continuum while taking no time in this one. What if, in this version of reality I didn't get arrested? Maybe my arrest only took place in one of an infinite number potential realities. Maybe I could opt for a reality experience in which I am free. The problem there is that I could end up in an even worse situation. An out-of-the-frying pan, sort of thing. Hell, I might even be the murderer or the artist in a parallel reality. The mind fairly boggles.

All this and the fore-knowledge that somebody called Gilles had committed the murder meant I could act in one of many ways.

I could:

(a) arrive at the scene in time to prevent the murder taking place, a measure not to be recommended against an armed assailant.

(b) As an eyewitness to the crime, I could avoid arrest by reporting the crime to this police.

(c) Follow the attacker to discover more information about him.

As it is, in my current time, I only consider these options in retrospect. Still, at least pondering these avenues takes my mind off the awful prospect of being transported to Paris to stand trial for a crime I did not commit. With these things in mind, I decided to consult with Jennifer. Nobody appeared to be around. My hand went to the crystal.

"That's quick," she said when I appeared in her lab. She looked away from her programming.

"What did you forget?"

I grinned, "I have a conundrum to run by you."

As I stepped from the Q' we fell into an embrace. I wasn't expecting it but feeling the warmth of Jennifer's body against me pushed the conundrum into the background.

We kissed briefly, Then Jennifer stepped back. "Wow! Where did that come from?"

I grinned, "Search me, but it felt good."

"Yes, well business first."

My eyebrows raised. "First?"

She smiled, "Down boy. What's this conundrum?"

As we sat drinking Earl Grey tea, I explained. "I'm in gaol, charged with murder. The real murderer claims to be an eyewitness accusing me of doing the deed. I need to be free to assimilate before my arrest, so I can follow the killer before he commits his crime."

"Wait a minute. Wouldn't following the perpetrator be dangerous?"

"It's the only way I can clear my name."

"Be careful Ossie," Jennifer crooned, reaching across to touch my arm.

"The thing is I have already witnessed the killer carry out his crime before my arrest. I want to experience it again without being arrested."

Jennifer chewed her lip. "That's very tricky because we are talking about parallel assimilations."

"Parallel assimilations?"

"Have you heard about the concept of parallel Earth?"

"Do you mean different copies of Earth with various things going on simultaneously?"

"In essence, we are talking about a multi-Earth. The concept of parallel worlds has been a favourite sci-fi subject in books and films since late Victorian times. But nobody has been able to prove it for real."

"So I would be the first person to do so."

"I think you are too glib about this. If it's possible to experience this phenomenon you need to understand that different versions of this Earth may have entirely different physical laws to ours."

"I thought it meant we would be living alternative realities in the same space-time."

"The consensus among scientists, who take this seriously, is that alternative reality means a variant of our world located next to ours with similar laws, but where history and events are different, as people have made different choices."

"That's what I have read."

So, you see, Ossie, it's hazardous because you have no idea what will happen next."

"Okay, but won't I be creating my reality in experiencing a parallel Earth?"

She became thoughtful at my comment. "You are bringing up some good points. I would have thought that the outcome of any alternative reality you engage in is already determined. The fact that you engage with it suggests your added role and the way you play it already exists."

"You mean I have no free will in it?" I asked, startled by the suggestion.

"Nobody knows for sure, but the fact that you engage with an alternative version of your reality strongly suggests it to be the case. Think of it as a movie. You can watch the video, thereby experiencing it, but you cannot change it."

"But what about if it's my movie?"

"In this reality, your whole life is your movie, and you can direct it as you wish. But not in any other variant of reality because you have no control over it."

"Are you certain about that?"

"Science is not sure about anything to do with time and space. But from my current knowledge, I think it is a fair guess."

I took a deep breath. "So with this parallel particle assimilation thing, whenever I get entangled with any variant of my reality, my fate is already sealed. That doesn't sound too good."

She shrugged, "Like I said, it's perilous." Then she added, "Because it's like trying to live an experience twice. Although this parallel living may work in Quantum theory, science hasn't proved it to be so."

"But it is possible," I said.

Jennifer looked at me, a frown creasing her brow. "One of the things that concern me about this is that you have to re-experience the whole experience. In other words, you cannot cherry pick the bits you want in the parallel reality."

"I'm sorry. You've lost me there, Jennifer," I said, her words jumbled in my mind.

She took a deep breath. "Okay, Ossie, in your previous current experience you were arrested right?"

"Yes."

"Well, supposing, in a parallel assimilation re-experience the police officer shot you. Then you are dead. Now although such an event would not change history and cause disharmonious ripples in space-time, It would be the end of you."

"So I would not be here hearing you talk about this!"

Jennifer frowned again. "Yes, I know. You wouldn't be here. So that means you wouldn't be there. And we probably would never have met."

"I'm glad we did," I grinned lasciviously.

She fixed me with a stern look. "Stay focused. Your life could depend on it."

"Then you will do it?"

"Much against my better judgement, yes."

Chapter 44

Making the necessary adjustments to incorporate, what Jennifer called 'Parasim', short for Parallel Assimilation, took her a few hours, which meant I had little time to spare. I checked the time. It read three thirty-two. Tony Baddick leapt into my mind. Shit! I only had twenty-eight minutes to get to my office.

After making a hurried apology for having to leave so abruptly, I drove my Ford Fiesta to my cramped office in East Acton. The Westway was more crowded than usual, with more road works. Or at least it seemed that way because I was in a hurry. The time read four ten when I reached Henchman Street. Tony's driver stood by his boss's sparkling Jag, outside the entrance to my office. Being late for Tony was terrible news for me. Buffer had been Tony's chauffeur cum mechanic for many-a-year. I knew him from my copper days.

"Still running that old banger," he said, indicating my - ten-year-old - Ford.

Putting on a brave face, I said, "At least I'm not driving someone else's motor, Buffer."

He indicated upstairs. "Tony's waiting for you and he ain't well pleased". He wiped his finger across his throat, to complete his comment.

It was no surprise to me to find my locked door wide open. Tony look very much at home in my office, like he owned the place. He seemed to have this effect wherever he went. The fear he stirred up had a lot to do with the presence of Tug Jones, his ever-present minder and the all-round thug.

Tony kept his feet on my desk, having rearranged my paperwork, which was now all over the floor. "Hello, Ozzie. It looks like you need to call a locksmith."

Tug guffawed at his boss's wit but stopped when he copped Tony's look, the one that could freeze fire.

"So, Ozzie," Tony said, toying with some knuckle dusters, I do hope you've got some good news for me, particularly since you've kept me waiting."

I gulped. Tony's look told me this was crunch time, and I hoped it wasn't my bones that were going to get crushed. I passed him a piece of paper with an address on it. "This is where your dog is residing."

He looked at the address. “Who's place is it?”

I was dreading this. Tony hadn't heard about not shooting messengers. Taking a deep breath, I said, “Frank Head owns the place.”

What happened next can only be explained regarding morphing, at least where Tony's face was concerned. He got up, his eyes blazing. “Are you saying fucking Hammer pinched my Springer?”

“That's what I've heard – yes.”

He turned to Tug. “That's what he's fucking heard. Did you hear that Tug?”

The Neanderthal sneered, “I heard it, boss.”

He turned on me, fitting his dusters, “Well, you had better have heard fucking right or you'll be fed to my fucking dogs – right?”

“Right Tony. I hope you and Springer are reunited very soon,” I said, forcing a smile.

“Yeah. Well here's a little on account. Tug's metal clad knuckles landed in my solar plexus. As I doubled over, I expelled a whoosh a whoosh of air, as well as remnants of my lunch, Tug landed a couple of blows to my head, before I met the floor. As Tony put the boot in, while climbing over me, he spat. “You better be fucking' right, for your sake.”

I lay on the floor, curled up in the foetal position, mainly because any movement was too painful to contemplate. I did a quick inventory to see if all my parts still worked. Although breathing was painful, my ribs didn't feel broken. My jaw was swollen but still seemed to be attached correctly. My office was a mess, more so than usual, and I needed a new lock. All-in-all I thought I had come off lightly. I prayed that Freddie had given me the goods. I didn't fancy ending up in a bowl marked Springer.

Chapter 45

To celebrate still being alive and not in traction, I made a dinner reservation at my favourite restaurant, Mezaroma, in Willesden. My magnanimous gesture, also being for Jennifer, as a reward for the energy and time she was putting into our project. I also contacted Nathan and told him to bring a friend? I figured that by making it a foursome, Jennifer would not read too much into my motives, which were not entirely altruistic. Nathan managed to free himself up but couldn't get a date at such short notice. I guessed he would have a shot at getting off with Jennifer. I phoned Jennifer and told her to put on her glad rags because I wanted to treat her to dinner and wouldn't take no for an answer.

Jennifer met me at the restaurant. She looked dazzling in a figure hugging dress and short fur jacket. She took one look at my face. “Ossie, what happened to you?”

“I had to see a man about a dog,” I answered wittily, refusing to go into any more detail.

“Okay, you don't have to tell me. But are you alright?”

I put my arm around her. “I will be once I toast you with a glass of bubbly.”

Nathan Goodfellow met us at the counter. He gave Jennifer a huge hug. Then he looked at me. “Looks like you collided with something that didn't agree with you.”

“Something like that,” I said.

He scanned the restaurant. “I've never eaten here before.”

“They have a fantastic selection to choose from, and the coffee is the best I've tasted,” I

complimented, my voice warm with enthusiasm. Then I saw our waiter, grinning. "Guido, my friend, what delicacies have you got to tempt us with tonight?"

He beckoned, "Follow me, Mr Doyle. Your table is ready."

The restaurant appeared full as we weaved in and out of tables till we came to ours. Nathan pulled Jennifer's chair out for her. I handed around menus. Guido suggested a Lambrusco as a starter.

Nathan asked me, "So how goes the adventure?"

"Apart from being incarcerated in gaol on a murder charge - great," I grinned.

Nathan's Eyes became saucers. "What are you talking about?"

"As we sit here about to dine I am also languishing in the Arles lock-up, waiting to be shipped to Paris for arraignment." The thought of this is bizarre. The reality is not what it used to be.

"That's freaky!" Nathan stated.

"Well, that's what I get for living more than one bunch of particles at a time."

Both Jennifer and Nathan laughed at this.

"Seriously, though," Nathan asked, "Who did you kill?"

"Nobody. But I saw the person who did."

"So how come you're in the frame?"

"The killer came forward as an eye witness and pointed the finger at me."

"Bummer."

"You could say that, Nathan."

The wine arrived, and Guido gave us some spiel about it's prime Lambrusco grapes coming from the Emilia-Romagna region. We ordered our food and talked about my conundrum.

Nathan offered, "I don't see the problem. You can't live more than one life at a time, no matter how many copies of reality there are."

"It's not quite that simple," Jennifer stated. "We are talking about parallel lives. They are considered to be non-physical 'lives' that mostly are very different from the life we live. So, if Ossie assimilates into a different parallel life in that space-time, he may also change, possibly into a life he no longer recognises."

"Shit! I never thought about that angle. That's bloody scary," I said, a chill shooting up my spine.

"What would happen to him if that happens?" Nathan asked.

Jennifer nibbled on her lip, then said, "I don't know. Possibly a mental meltdown."

During our mains, the topic centred around my predicament in France. "So how do you propose to get yourself off the hook?" Nathan asked.

"I think I am sowing seeds of doubt in the police chief's mind. If that works and I'm free and, I can carry on with my investigation."

"Which one? Van Gogh or the murderer?" Nathan asked.

"They could turn out to be one and the same," I responded.

“Really!” Jennifer's eyebrows raised.

I explained, “Annie Besant said she saw a man with Vincent. He had a jagged scar on a callused hand. I saw the very disfigurement on the side that plunged the dagger into the person I am supposed to have killed.”

“That's pretty odd,” Nathan said.

“Yes, and it means that murdered may well have shot Vincent. So I have to avoid arrest if I am to lay this mystery to rest.”

“Why not just go back to when Vincent received his gunshot wound and witness the act?” Nathan suggested.

“We've been over that,” Ossie said. Unless I know the exact time and location it won't work, will it Jen?” I explained, looking at her.

Nathan responded, I know that, but you know the place and date he got shot, so why not hang out in the wheat field and see what went down.”

I saw the worried look on Jennifer's face. “It's too risky, Ossie. If you get spotted, you could easily get shot as well.” She then added, “But more importantly it would mean living a parasim, one in which you have no control over your fate.”

Nathan's expression changed. It was only momentary, but there was a flash of anger, marring his easy-going easygoing features. Did I detect a note of jealousy? Did he think he had some claim over Jennifer? I said Inverted commas I know there's personal risk involved, but it's the only way I can remain at liberty.”

“I know that. But is it worth you taking the risk,” Jennifer said, touching my sleeve.”

Nathan put down his utensils. He felt sick to the stomach. He had introduced them to each other. “I have to be going,” Nathan said, abruptly.

“You haven't tried Guido's out-of-this-world coffee yet,” I said.

He got up to leave. “I don't have enough time. Have to get going.” He turned to Jennifer. “I'll give you a ring.” Then he walked out without any bye or leave to me.

“Is that normal behaviour for Nathan,” I asked, once he had left.

Jennifer shook her head. “Something must be wrong.”

“I think I must have pissed him off somehow,”

“Why? How?”

“I suspect he has the hots for you and sees me as a rival for your affections.”

Jennifer laughed, “Nonsense. We've been good mates for many years, but there's been no mention of anything else.”

I shrugged. “Then I have no idea.”

Her face darkened. “Do you men see me as some trophy to fight over?”

Taken aback, I replied, “No, of course not! I was just trying to see it from Nathan's angle.”

“Bull shit, Ossie. They are your thoughts - not his. Be big enough to own them.”

Shit, women and their emotional outbursts,! I said to myself, justifying my crassness. “Jennifer, I

didn't mean ...”

She shot back, “... I am not any ones fucking trophy. Christ, Ossie, I'm more intelligent than most men on this planet, but that wouldn't be difficult - would it?”

The drive back to Jennifer's place was tense and uncomfortable. Even back at her home, she was cold and indifferent towards me. Shit, I had stuffed things up.

She indicated the couch. “You can sleep there.”

“At this point, I didn't give a shit. I didn't feel like sex. But I didn't want us to part like this. I had to concede Jen had a point. “I'm sorry for stuffing things up, Jennifer. I don't want us to part on bad terms.”

She looked morose. “Ossie, you're a dick head.”

“Okay, Jennifer, I was wrong. What more can I say?” I said showing the palms of my hands in surrender. “Please don't let my stupidity and arrogance spoil an enjoyable evening together.”

“Fuck it all, Ossie. You think a Spaghetti Marinara and some red plonk gives you the right to think you own me.”

“No, Jennifer it's not like that.”

“What is it like then,” she demanded, glaring at me.

Now I saw red. “Christ, Jennifer, what do you want from me? An apology in blood!”

“Fucking grow up. Do you think acknowledging your insult to me will have me leaping into your arms saying take me, I'm yours?”

“No, of course not.” I was getting choked on humble pie, and I didn't like it.

She stared at me. “Good, because it isn't going to happen.”

Sometime during the night, I got up to get a glass of water. As I tip-toed to the kitchen, guided by the flashlight on my phone, I heard a sound behind me. Jennifer stood there in the shadows, wearing a large loose t-shirt and not much else. She asked, “What are you doing?”

“I couldn't sleep. I felt bad about how things went between us. I realised what a prick I've been.”

“Yes, you have,” she said, softness in her voice. Suddenly she leant forward and kissed me, a long tender kiss with her hand stroking the nape of my neck to pull me down towards her. It was electric; I had never experienced a kiss like that. I felt myself becoming aroused as she pulled me closer to her. She smiled as she slowly backed away from the kiss, and whispered, “Would you like to come to my bed?”

It wasn't a difficult decision to make. Besides, without waiting for an answer, Jen took my hand and led me into the bedroom, where we kissed again. I was struck dumb by the sheer excitement and depth of pleasure that this kiss produced in me. I tried to get my head around what was happening. All I knew was that this extraordinary woman had hypnotised me with her body and I was helpless in her power.

She pushed me back on her bed in the darkness, breathing heavily. “Here's, the perfect place, take me.”

Before I could utter a word she kissed me once again, caressing my neck as before. With the other hand, she grasped my erection. Then, with no more words, she bent down and entwined her mouth around my manhood. Within a few seconds of ecstasy, she stood up and whispered in my ear, “That will do nicely.”

Chapter 46

I was back in Arles, but something felt different this time. I couldn't put my finger on why this was so, but I didn't feel entirely comfortable. I was the me I knew but something, very subtle, seemed a bit out of whack. I was walking along Ave de Beaucaire, to the location of the murder. It was an hour before the crime would take place. I couldn't believe I waited for somebody to commit such a crime. I used the same tree cover as before.

As I waited in the shade, a man riding a bicycle and an elderly woman walking her dog came by - there wasn't any sign of the protagonists. My watch indicated that the verbal altercation should be taking place between the two men by that time. They hadn't turned up. Then it hit me. Perhaps in this variant of my reality, there was no crime. Maybe the murder never took place. Was this what parallel reality was?

I felt nauseous, and my head began to throb. My brain seemed in turmoil, unable to make sense of two versions of time and space in the same instant. I was unsure of everything and anything. As I was still at liberty, my arrest apparently hadn't happened. At least within this assimilated parallel experience, I was able to pursue the mystery surrounding Van Gogh's shooting, if indeed it had taken place. In any case, I needed to know what made him tick and in particular any connection he may have had with the scarred man. Talking with Dr Gachet seemed my next best move.

Walking down the muddy lane to Paul Gachet's house, was like featuring in Cezanne's painting 'The House of Dr Gachet'. Although the sky was greyer in the masterpiece, and it looked like rain. A middle-aged woman met me at the door. She blocked the entrance, demanding to know who I was. I said, "Monsieur Doyle to see Paul Gachet."

"You will have to wait until he has seen his patients," she said officiously.

"I only need a couple of minutes of his time. It is most urgent."

She eyed me suspiciously. I will see if the doctor can fit you in, Monsieur."

I thanked her graciously and took a seat.

When the doctor came out into his reception, the woman spoke to him. He looked at me as though I were a stranger he had never met.

I ventured, "Sorry to disturb you Dr Gachet but I need to speak with you about Vincent, the artist."

He beckoned me into his surgery. Once inside, He said, "Has anything happened to him?"

I was puzzled. "I wondered if you could shed some more light on the artist's death."

Dr Gachet looked like a rabbit caught in headlights. "Has he died? He was alive, if not well, when I saw him earlier today."

My face must have looked like a question mark. Of course, I was in a different version of reality. One in which Vincent did not lay bleeding to death in a wheat field. This interview was decidedly odd for both of us. "His brother is worried about him."

Paul laughed, "Theo is always fussing over him, like a mother hen. I sometimes think it is part of Vincent's problem. He has never had to stand on his own two feet" Then he said, "What do you mean, he is dead?"

I retracted, "It's what I heard, but I was apparently misinformed." However, I would like to speak with you further about him. You are obviously busy. Perhaps we could get together for a talk when you finish here."

He stared at me. “Who exactly are you and why are you interested in Vincent, Monsieur?”

“Oswald Doyle. I will tell you when you finish here?”

He looked at his wall clock. “Very well, Monsieur you may call back in two hours.”

“Thank you,” I smiled, taking my leave.

I returned at the appointed time and entered his surgery.

“Ah, it's you!” he said, slightly startled. Dr Gachet looked up from notes on his desk. He asked, “What do you wish to know about Vincent?”

“Tell me about the time when you first met him, doctor,” I said, taking a seat.

He cupped his chin in his hand as he did in Vincent's portrait of him. “It was when he first arrived in Arles. I had organised somewhere for him to stay but he decided to remain at the Auberge Ravoux, mainly because it was cheaper than the hotel proposed by myself, which charged six francs a day for full board accommodation.”

“What was he like, demeanour wise?”

“He was inspired and very charming – a gentle soul. He was like a child in some ways, very excited about the colours and the brightness around him.”

“Did you know his brother, Theo?”

“Not very well. Only what Vincent told me about him. He contacted me once about Vincent and asked if I would keep an eye on him.”

“And his brother paid Vincent's expenses.”

“It wasn't much. Vincent only paid three francs fifty a day for a rented room. It was only, a tiny attic room with a bed, dressing table and a built-in cupboard. Although Ravoux did give him storage space for his paintings and drawings, in a shed at the back.”

“And he was happy with that arrangement?”

“You must understand, Vincent was different to most of us. He didn't need much in his life, apart from his art. But the painter yearned for the feeling of a sense of belonging. He also required a simple order to his life. Ravoux provided this and Vincent was able to operate in a way that worked for him.”

“I must talk with Monsieur Ravoux again.”

“I don't think you will have much luck there.”

“Why do you think that?”

“He keeps very Quiet about Van Gogh.”

“Why?”

“Monsieur Doyle, many people around here find Vincent to be strange and even dangerous at times. He is different to them, and many fear him and avoid him if they can.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, he sometimes has funny turns. He tried to cut off his ear, you know. That is not normal behaviour.”

“So why did Ravoux take to him?”

“Monsieur Ravoux is a proud and boastful man. Part of the deal was that Vincent would paint a portrait of Adeline Ravoux, his eldest daughter. He would hang it in the bar and gloat over it.”

“You don't like the man?”

“I don't dislike him, but we do seem to clash on occasion.”

The doctor looked tired after his busy day. “Are you saying that this Ravoux took advantage of the artist?”

“Arthur Ravoux may well have taken advantage of Vincent's nature. He may well have praised the artist's work to coerce him. But there is no proof of this. Vincent is a simple fellow who became enchanted with this village. In a letter to his brother, he praised its old thatched roofs and colours, calling it 'profoundly beautiful'. He told me that he found the juxtaposition between the rustic country life and recent modern additions, such as the railway and the bridge on the River Rhone fascinating.”

I could see the good doctor was flagging, but I had to press on. “What was his mental health like at that time?”

He looked at me wondering how much to divulge. “As his doctor, I cannot talk about his medical condition.”

“Okay doctor, what was his constitution like generally, from a friend's perspective?”

“He appeared to be in good health. After all, he covered vast distances on foot with his painting gear. And he was painting as much as he could.”

In this reality, the artist was still alive and living at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. “Doctor, I would like to visit Vincent. Can you get him to see me?”

Paul Gachet rubbed his red stubbled chin. He is currently a patient at the St Remy hospital. He is a very private person, and he does not take well to strangers, especially those who wish to interrogate him.”

Damn - it wasn't going to be easy. “Doctor, you seem very protective of him.”

“He has a big heart and a fragile soul Monsieur. Coupled with various debilitating medical conditions it prompts me to treat him kindly and gently.” Paul Gachet rose from behind his desk. “It has been a long day and now it is time for my dinner. So please leave.”

He did not look well, but it may have been my only chance to question him. “Just one more thing doctor, do you know of somebody called Gilles, who has a scar on the back of his right hand?”

He stared at me. “Gilles? I don't think so. Why?”

“He has calluses on his hands. Did Vincent ever mention such a person to you.”

“No? Why would he?” He gestured for me to leave. “No more questions. Please leave.”

To have been able to meet with Vincent would have been quite a coup but that was not likely to happen while Paul Gachet acted like a mother hen around him.

Thinking about meeting with Vincent gave me an idea. It was obvious to me once I thought about it. If I could witness the Phaeton driver's murder, I could also be on hand when Vincent got shot. The problem, though, is a clash of realities, or so Jennifer told me. I needed her to explain it more clearly. But the gist of it, if I have it correctly, has to do different experiences in different parallel realities.

Chapter 47

Nathan Goodfellow sat in the empty lecture hall, nervously drumming his fingers on the lectern that had supported his lecture notes from the previous period. It helped him think. After his rude departure from the restaurant, he hadn't any idea how to face Jennifer again. He needed to see her. He desperately needed to speak with her. He could apologise for being an ungrateful prick and seek her forgiveness. Or he could come straight out with the reason for his bad behaviour, namely that he had the hots for her and felt jealous about the cosiness he observed between her and Ossie. Either option had its problems. Apologising and eating humble pie could clear the air but wouldn't get him any closer to showing how he felt about her.

Nathan had known Jennifer for at least five years. They had spent many-an-hour, mostly late at night, comparing life stories as well as being a willing shoulder for each other. They got on well most of the time, like brother and sister. He knew that when you have this close but platonic friendship, it becomes increasingly difficult to move it up a notch and introduce love and lust into the mix.

Nathan had accepted the way things were. He enjoyed Jennifer's company on occasion while she had no other man in her life. But now that Oswald Doyle was on the scene he could no longer hide his true feelings. Although hiding his true feelings had been a safe option, Ozzie had proved to be the catalyst that was forcing him to come clean. He firmed his jaw, grabbed his mobile and tapped Jennifer's name in his contact list.

One of the most challenging aspects of living in a parallel reality with a time element is thrown in for good measure is being able to follow a new script. It's like you've just learned your part in play, then, at the last minute have to deal with an entirely different production. Such confusion can cause panic and anxiety to rear their ugly heads. I experienced this back at the Hotel Carrel, at the reception desk where I received a shock. I casually asked Catherine for my room key. Normally she was bright and chatty but not today. She said, "Name please."

"I couldn't believe it. Thinking the hotel proprietress had taken leave of her senses, I said, "Oswald Doyle.

Catherine scanned the register. She looked up at him. "Sorry Monsieur There is no Oswald Doyle mentioned here. You must have the wrong hotel."

"I've been staying in room five for the last three nights," I responded. "How can you not have me listed?"

She re-checked the bookings, tutted and said, "No Monsieur, A Monsieur Trueil has rented the room for the last week."

"That's impossible!" I retorted. "What sort of place do you run here?"

My raised voiced got some attention. I looked up and saw Albert Carrel. The swarthy middle-aged man addressed Catherine. "Is there a problem here?"

She indicated me. "This man is confused. He thinks he is staying here."

"Does he have a reservation?" the proprietor asked.

"No Albert. He thinks he is already staying here."

He turned to me. "Monsieur, I don't know what your problem is, but you heard what my wife said. Now leave before I get the Gendarme."

A couple of thoughts hit me in quick succession. Of course, I was experiencing a parallel simulation, and it seemed, in this one, I was not staying at the Hotel Carrel, in Arles. I had nowhere

to stay, but I didn't need to. I could always stay at Jennifer's place.

Following a couple of shots, for Dutch courage, Nathan felt he had enough pluck to tell Jennifer how he felt about her - that is if he knew. He waited in the restaurant for Jenny to show up. While so doing Nathan fantasised about her desire for him being as great as his for her. As the minutes ticked by, he became increasingly agitated. She was late for their date. An incessant clock watcher he found it increasingly difficult to settle down to his mundane life. Worse still, he had pissed off the most precious woman he had ever befriended.

Jennifer duly arrived. She undid the lightweight purple parka she wore and sat down opposite him. He poured some uncapped White wine for her.

“What did you want to see me about that's so urgent?” she asked, handling the glass.”

Nathan made to clink his glass against hers.

“Why white wine?” she queried.

“It's what you always drink. I thought ...”

“... Whatever, but it would have been better if you had asked, instead of taking me for granted.”

The growing tension didn't bode well. Trying to extricate himself, Nathan said, “I just thought I'd have a drink ready for you, that's all.”

“What's the hurry, Nathan? More to the point what's wrong with you these days? You've been acting very strange lately.”

“What, because I walked out on you guys for dinner?” Nathan responded, immediately regretting this. He added, “What I mean is ...”

“... Yes, Nathan. So why did you walk out on us?”

He felt himself perspiring. The moment had come for him to declare himself. He began, “Jenny, we've known each other for many years, and we've always been close friends - right?”

She reached across to him, smiling, “Yes Nate, that's why I'm concerned about you.”

He paused, trying to find the right words. “I felt uncomfortable that night. No, let's be honest here. I was angry.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. Well, I do know. Because, Jenny, something is going on between you and Oswald.”

“Something is going on! What do you mean?” she demanded, a puzzled expression creasing her features.

He took a deep breath. “When I saw the connection you guys appeared to have, after knowing each other for a very short time, it made me realise my true, repressed feelings about you.”

“Nathan! What are you saying?”

There was no going back now. Speak or forever hold your peace, came to mind. Nathan reached across to take Jenny's hand. He looked deeply into her eyes. “I love you, Jenny.” There, he had said it. His heart seemed to stop as he waited for her response.

She slowly shook her head, disbelieving, “You were jealous of Ossie?”

“Jealous!” That was a big word, an emotionally loaded word. Nathan hesitated before answering. “Fuck it! Yes, Jen, and I'm ashamed of my behaviour.” Then he asked, tentatively, “Are you and

him? ...”

She shied away from him. “... Nathan, don't go there please.”

He leant forward grasping her hand. “But I love you, Jen. I want us to be together.”

Jennifer sat stunned. She had no idea he felt that way. Why should she? He had never declared himself before. “Nathan, this is a bit of a surprise, and I think I need another glass of white.”

I sat in the Q' quietly, trying to make some sense of the various realities I had been experiencing. It occurred to me that we do not just live in one reality. We have all different kinds of experiences, each being our reality at the time. So, in a sense, we are all space travellers. Except in my case, there is a time factor involved as well. Okay, that was my philosophical moment. I next went looking for Jennifer.

A quick search of the farmhouse told me she was not at home. I was in need of coffee and rest. I know the two do not exactly go together, but it tends to work for me, at least most of the time. Having found where Jen kept the necessary ingredients and having boiled the water, the mud coloured sludge in the mug tasted better than it looked. Jennifer had a comfy couch with a surfeit of cushions. Following my caffeine zap, it was time for a nap. A zap and a nap - that's funny.

I woke to the sound of keys rattling in the door and raucous laughter. I sat bolt upright, my sleepy eyes scanning the front door. Jennifer and Nathan staggered together as the door burst inward, propelled by their combined weight against it.

Nathan, seeing me, said, “Fuck! What are you doing here?”

“I wasn't expecting you, Ossie,” Jennifer giggled.

I was intruding on her space. She and Nathan looked cosy and pissed. “I had to come back. The hotelier kicked me out!”

She came over to me and threw her arms around me in a huge sensuous hug. I felt very self-conscious with Nathan standing there firing optical knives in my direction. “Thanks, Jennifer,” I responded, giving her a half-hearted hug, in return.

“Let's all have a party,” she said, spinning around and kicking off her shoes.

I saw Nathan grimace at the suggestion.

Feeling uncomfortable, I said, “I'll just crash somewhere else for the night. You guys just do your thing, never mind me.”

Jennifer looked a bit hurt, while totally inebriated. “Aw, cmon Ossie, lighten up a bit.”

I needed her help to get me back to France to witness what had happened to Van Gogh, but I didn't trust her in her present state. I rose from the couch. “I need some rest. I'll catch up with you in the morning.”

Chapter 48

“At some time during the night, Jennifer crawled in the spare bed, beside me. Her body felt soft and warm, despite the track pants and loose sweater she was wearing. I instinctively, in a half-sleep state, snuggled up and put my arms around her. Then the tears came. I held her close, saying nothing. I gently stroked her hair until the crying subsided. She would tell me what was on her mind if and when she wanted to. I had a sleepless night after that. This lack of rest was mainly due to my being turned on by the sexy, softly snoring Jennifer and the weird but exciting dream that played on my mind.

I grabbed my phone and made a few notes to remember it. In the dream I was back in France, taking photos of Vincent receiving his gunshot wound. I was witnessing it but couldn't make any real sense of it. I couldn't see who shot him, but I did know he didn't kill himself. I wanted to wake Jennifer up and tell her, but I didn't think it would be a good idea.

After another couple of restless hours, just before daybreak, I got up and brewed coffee for both of us. There didn't seem to be any sign of Nathan, so I figured he had either gone home or was sleeping off his hangover somewhere else in the house. I padded back to bed, armed with caffeine life savers. Jennifer stirred, blinked, and said, "Good God, how did I end up here?"

I grinned, "You tied one on last night. Here's a stimulating kick starter for you." I handed her the mug.

"I don't need a kick starter. I just want to die," Jennifer groaned.

I propped myself up. "I have something odd but exciting to tell you."

"What?" she said, brusquely, yawning.

"I dreamt I took photos of Vincent's shooting incident."

She quickly jerked to consciousness. "So, did the artist shoot himself?"

"It was just a dream. But what was important was my ability to record it with a camera."

She took a small sip of coffee and pushed her hair back. "Fascinating, but as you pointed out it was just a dream."

I became animated. "But what if I could take photos and bring them back here? Wouldn't that be something?"

She groaned again, held her head and slumped down in bed, hiding under the duvet. Her muffled voice said, "It's too much for me to contemplate."

At around 11 am, we had toast with honey and strong coffee for breakfast. Jennifer, slightly better for wear, never mentioned the night before. Neither did I. She asked me about my latest forage into Quantum time/space.

I finished chewing a piece of toast. "If only I could explain the feeling. Just imagine being in a period in history with knowledge of what is going to happen but not being able to tell anybody about it. It's an awesome responsibility."

"I'm sure it is, Ossie. But apart from being your space travel fix, what good is it? You can't prove it happened and, whatever you discover, can be found on Google."

I sat back, surprised. "What are you saying? I'm talking about your genius. Besides, I have a case to solve."

"Yes, it's amazing and all that. But unless we can share this with other scientists it just comes down to a bit of self-indulgence. Surely you can see that."

"Jennifer, some of the things I have witnessed won't be found on Google."

"Which just means nobody is going to believe you, and you can't prove anything," she retorted.

"Bloody hell, Jennifer, what I am feeling, but can't explain, is what it must have been like for the first moonwalker."

"Hardly, he had NASA to back up his story, plus actual coverage."

“So, what if I could provide actual coverage of Vincent's shooting?”

Jennifer smiled, wistfully. “Even if it were possible to record such an event digitally the images couldn't survive the particle assimilation transfer between space-time realities.”

“How do you know that for certain?”

Ignoring his question, she countered, “In any case, Ossie, to take a modern device into another simulated particle reality, contravenes the rules and protocols of time travel.”

“Ah, but what about space travel?”

“What do you mean?” she asked draining her coffee mug.

“I don't know really. It's just a vague idea. In any case, isn't using the Q' taking a modern device into another version of reality?”

“Yes, but the Q' can retain its quantum integrity.”

“What do you mean?”

“Christ, Ossie, this is complicated. Look, there's particle integrity and wave integrity. What this means is that particles can retain their substance.” She picked up her mug. This mug comprises atomic particles which keep it how it is. With quantum integrity, waves stay as potential, with no particular form.”

“Yes, but the Q' looks like a pumpkin and keeps that form.”

“Not while it non-assimilates between particle realities. Now, even if I could make a digital camera that did not assimilate between space frameworks, re-assimilation into now time would change the particle makeup of the images. So whatever you managed to record back there would not look the same in this time-frame.”

I frowned, “I'm getting what you are on about, but still contend that when stepping out of the 'Q', back in France, it has a particular form.”

“Only in your mind because that is how your mind wants to see it. Look what's happens as soon as you step out of the Q'?”

“It disappears.”

Jennifer smiled, “Ossie, it only appears to go. It is retaining its quantum integrity.”

“So, if I can see it, am I retaining my quantum integrity?”

Jennifer looked at me. “Why are you here?”

“Really! Because I want to witness Van Gogh's shooting.”

“What do you hope to achieve by that?”

“I will know what happened.”

“In that particular parallel assimilation – yes.”

Then I got her meaning. - By mixing parallel realities, I could not be sure of any sequence of events.

I asked her, “Is it possible to be in the original assimilation and be in it at the point of the shooting incident.”

Jennifer threw up her hands. “Ossie, in this reality I have to get some potatoes from the garden.”

He followed her out there and continued to probe her brain. “What do you mean by original assimilation? What we understand to be real is merely a projection of our mind. Therefore it's a virtual reality as the light from a film projector before the light image hits the screen.”

“And your point is?” she asked, concentrating on digging for spuds.

“That there is, in essence, no difference between one virtual reality experience and another. So your idea of the difference between what you see to be your 'Reality' and virtual realities does not exist.”

I argued, albeit from an ignorance viewpoint, “That doesn't make sense because I can reach out and touch things in this reality.”

Putting some King Edwards in a wicker basket, she said, “Yes, because of your participation in your actual reality. Think about the seasons. They all exist, but we only experience one at a time. Whereas the planet experiences them all at once.”

Now I was getting the idea. “Okay, so would it be possible for me to record my positive experience and play it in another active experience if there is no difference between the two?”

Jennifer chewed on her lip. “Putting it that way, in theory, I don't see why not. But it will mean some reprogramming or deletions. And, more importantly, it will mean that you are still in prison on a murder charge.”

“Yes, but I will be there before any of that happened.”

“And you cannot change history. Remember that.”

“But that history only occurred because I became part of that reality over a hundred years after it happened.”

Picking up her basket, she sighed heavily. “Look, Ossie, think of these truths as parallel railway lines. Once you are on one of these lines you have to go where the line takes you. So when you are in any particular reality, you experience all that is in that reality.”

I sat up straight as the realisation hit me. “Then I can't avoid being in gaol.”

“That's what I've been trying to get through to you.”

“That sucks!”

“You can't just play fast and loose with space-time. You have to take responsibility for all your thoughts and actions.”

Getting a grip on the bigger picture of space-time particle assimilations wasn't easy. “So I have to live out that particular timeline from witnessing the shooting event to landing up in gaol and whatever went on in between.”

“I don't see any other way around it,” she said placing the basket on her kitchen table.

I sighed, getting up. “Then that's the way it is.” I reflected on that silly concept for a moment, then said, “Maybe Nathan knows somebody at the university who could come up with ideas about quantum photography.”

“Okay, you follow that up while I tweak the programming for your next experience.”

As I grabbed my car keys she came up close and gave me a hug, “Ossie Doyle, you are a very brave man, the most courageous guy I know.”

I grinned, “I bet you say that to all your quantum travellers.”

Chapter 49

“It probably wouldn’t work mate,” Nathan said, as we had lunch together in Harry's café, which was just down from the college.

“So that's the best you can offer?”

“Well, I don't know of any technology that's up to it.”

“Okay, so do you know of anyone else who could help?”

Nathan became silent. Then he murmured. “I want to apologise for my bad behaviour the other night.”

The change of subject threw me a little. “Don't worry mate. We all have our off days.”

“Seriously, though, I am sorry, and I want to buy you lunch to make up for it.”

Never one to look a free meal in the mouth, or something like that, I said, “Great. I'll have the T-bone with salad and chips.”

As we ate, we refocussed on the subject of quantum photography. Nathan said, “There have been attempts at quantum photography, but with an actual camera. You're talking about a virtual camera to film a virtual reality.”

I responded between chunks of T-bone, “Yes, but don't you see, that may be the perfect way to go about it.”

He shook his head. “I can't see how such a technology could be possible.”

I argued, “But we don’t know that. My God, supposing it did work! Imagine how much the images would be worth. I mean, let's say I’m talking with Vincent Van Gogh and filming him in the flesh...”

“...You’re in fantasy land, mate. How are you going to film Vincent, even if it were possible, without him questioning the strange device you are holding? And, apart from that, you cannot bring anything back from the past.”

“What, even light?”

“You’d have to ask Jennifer that one.”

“Maybe you could ask her for me,” I suggested.

He frowned, “That’s if she will ever speak to me again.”

“Wow! What happened with you guys?”

Nathan baulked, “I'd rather leave that alone.”

“Sure, it's your stuff.” Then I felt the cartoonist light bulb switch on above my head. “Hey, I’ve got an idea. You know how the Q' records data from where I’ve been and what I have done.”

“Yes.”

“Well, what if we fitted it with a webcam. After all the Q' is, in effect, wherever I am.”

Nathan thought about the proposition. “A film of Vincent would be worth a fortune, probably more than the Q' itself. “Okay, I will try and speak about it with Jennifer,”

“You won’t regret it.”

“I’ve a feeling I already have.”

Chapter 50

Back in Auvers sur Oise I had witnessed what happened, but wasn't sure which version of reality it had occurred in, and I still didn't understand why it had happened. I had seen the man with the scarred hand shoot him. I had seen Van Gogh fall to the ground. But right now I could see no rhyme or reason for the murder. Until I could work out a strong convincing motive, I decided not to tell anybody, not even Theo, who was awaiting my report. It would be another three days until I first met with Vincent's brother and a further three days until my arrest. I only had a window of six days to make sense of what had happened. Six days before incarceration for a crime I did not commit.

But I still had little to go on with the case. As I was starting from square one, the killer had to be somebody I had not yet questioned. As the people I would speak with after Vincent's funeral would be people I encountered for the first time, I could now question them from the standpoint of Vincent's murder – not suicide. Although this approach limited the number of suspects I had, it did have the potential to open up new leads.

One of these leads was Marguerite Gachet, the doctor's teenage daughter, who was to be one of the mourners at Vincent's funeral. I didn't know anything about her at the time, so, apart from being an attractive young woman, she held no particular interest for me. Setting my chin determinedly, starting with what little I knew to be fact, I set out to find Marguerite Gachet, a talented pianist, homoeopath. I had to find a way to meet with her away from her father's house. Although she was nineteen years old, Paul Gachet, I discovered, was known to be a bit of a control freak and very protective, where his daughter was concerned. So it was unlikely that he would have been amenable to my quizzing her. The problem was that as neither of us had even laid eyes on each other, she was hardly likely to meet with me anywhere.

By obtaining some local knowledge, I found out that Dr Gachet visited the St Remy sanatorium on a regular basis and would be doing so later that day. I waited until he had left his home surgery, then I approached his front door. From inside the house, I heard the sound of a piano, which inevitably meant that Marguerite was home.

In response to my knock the playing ceased, and I heard footsteps approaching. Before me stood a tall blond young woman, her hair piled atop her head, further increasing her height.

Can I help you Monsieur? She asked, appraising me.

“Are your Marguerite Gachet?”

She eyed me with suspicion. “Yes, and who are you, Monsieur?”

“Forgive me,” I said, doffing my boater, “my name is Oswald Doyle, and I want to talk to you about the artist, Van Gogh.”

She visibly reddened before me but tried to hide it. She seemed like a delicate flower caught in bright sunlight. “I know little about the artist. Vincent did paint my portrait, though, many times.”

I had just seen him get shot, but she did not seem to be aware of his demise. It seemed best not to mention the terrible incident. “Yes, I believe he is a friend of your father's. Did he speak to you much while you were his model?”

“Monsieur, he said little about anything.”

“Did he ever mention a man called Gilles?”

She looked down at the floor, averting her eyes. “No Monsieur, nobody of that name.”

Just then we were rudely interrupted by a red-headed young man, who stormed up to the door. Pushing in front of her, he demanded, "Who are you and why are you pestering my sister?"

"I am seeking information about a man called Gilles. Sorry, I don't know his last name, but he has a jagged scar on his right hand."

He glared at me. "We know nothing about any such person. Now kindly leave and don't come back."

"And who are you?"

"I am Paul Gachet, not that it is any of your concern."

His arrogance annoyed me. I was no cur with its tail between its legs. I had to say something. "Oh, but it might be," I smiled, knowing my comment was but a small victory compared to his verbal onslaught.

Marguerite stood back, hiding behind her brother. She clammed up, leaving him to deal with me.

"Why is who I am of any concern to you?"

"Anyone who has recently had dealings with Vincent van Gogh is of interest to me."

Something was amiss in the Gachet household, and I wasn't likely to find out what it was from talking to the brother and sister. He was just rude and arrogant, and she was a timid mouse. I needed to speak with somebody who knew the family intimately. But who?

I was also curious about Marguerite having opened the door to me herself. Dr Gachet was a man of means, so I expected a receptionist-secretary or, at the very least, a maid, to block my path into the doctor's home. This lack of home help suggested to me that the physician did not have a receptionist or girl in his employ, or it was their day off. Surely such a busy man as Dr Gachet needed somebody to look after his patients' appointments in his absence. Perhaps he was looking for a new receptionist. All this reasoning was merely guesswork, but when new leads are lacking, curiosity and supposition are all that's left to keep the senses keen.

My focus on the Gachet family brought forth a curious result. As I walked past the local store, in Rue Dourbigny, which had fruit and vegetables in crates displayed out front, I saw the doctor's name shown on a notice board. Beneath it was an advertisement for a doctor's receptionist. Aha, I thought. So he doesn't have anyone to run his practice at present. Then I had an idea. I entered the store and saw two customers standing at the counter. One, was an elderly woman in black, waiting as the shopkeeper added food items to the order from stacked shelves behind the till. The woman in front, paid, picked up her bags and left. The other customer, a man, just wanted tobacco. As he left the shop, the shopkeeper, a blond woman, with hair straying from her bonnet looked up at me and asked, "What do you want Monsieur?"

"Madame, I am interested in finding out about the advertisement for a doctor's secretary."

She looked at me in such a way it seemed as though she was trying to weigh me up like she would her vegetables. She said, "Normally it is a woman's work. But who am I to decide such things?"

"Do you know who used to be Dr Gachet's receptionist?"

"That would be Emilie Cabonet."

"Do you know where she lives?"

Another customer came in the shop. The owner acknowledged her customer and turned back to me. "Why do you want to know Monsieur?"

“She would know of his ways and foibles. Such knowledge could help me to secure the position.”

She served her customer, who it turned out, had quite a list. Damn! She was just about to tell me something. Now I will have to warm her up all over again. I waited patiently until the woman had grabbed all her purchases and left. Then I said, “I know you're very busy, so just tell me how to can find this Emilie Cabonet and I will be gone.”

She scrawled an address on a sales slip and handed it to me. “This did not come from me,” she said. “Best of luck, Monsieur.”

Nine Rue des Fleurs lived up to the street's name. Bright blossoms populated a wooden trestle that formed an arch around the front door. Bedded flowers flourished either side of the crazy paved path. My knock elicited a response from within.

“Who is it?”

It was a melodic female voice. “My name is Oswald Doyle. I believe you used to work for Dr Gachet.”

“Why do you want to know?”

Everyone seemed so guarded around here. “Can you open the door, please? It would be so much easier for both of us.”

“It is easier for me with the door closed.”

“I thought you might be able to tell me about Dr Gachet and Vincent, the artist.”

The door creaked open a few inches. M. Cabonet looked me up and down and must have decided I was okay. The door opened wider. She said, “I used to work for him. He is a good man but naive in some ways.”

“What do you mean Madame?”

“I tried turning a blind eye, but it became too much.”

I found her comments intriguing. “What do you mean it became too much?”

“I am not one to gossip Monsieur but the goings on in Paul's house became too much for me to bear.”

“Perhaps we should sit down, and you tell me what you mean.”

She looked at me with suspicion. “You're not police, are you. I mean I would not like anyone to get into trouble. That artist seemed simple, but he knew what he was doing.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“That weird artist, Vincent, of course.”

“Madame Cabonet, perhaps it's best to talk inside.”

She stood back opened her door and let me pass.

We sat talked in Emilie's sitting room. Cluttered with the usual things people fill their homes: pictures, photos, books, knick-knacks, etc., there was nothing particularly engaging about the space.

As a detective, I had learned that if you want to get people to open up its wise to engage them in banter about the things they love - a photo here; a decorative vase there. I mentioned a particularly captivating watercolour painting.

She smiled, "My grandfather painted that."

"An excellent piece of work indeed Madame."

"Thank you, Monsieur. It is my favourite."

I needed to get back on track. "What was Vincent doing that made you feel so uncomfortable that you had to leave Dr Gachet's employ?"

She fiddled with ends of a shawl she wore across her shoulders. "They thought they had kept it from me, but I knew what he was getting up to with the doctor's daughter."

"Marguerite!" I uttered. "Were they having an affair?"

"You could call it that. And after everything, Paul had done for him."

The affair, of course, could have been gossip but were it true it would explain Marguerite's reticence to talk about him to me. "How did you come to know about the affair?"

"Monsieur, apart from my secretarial and receptionist duties I sometimes cleaned around their house. Well, Dr Paul doesn't have anyone else to do it. I was walking past the spot where Vincent's unfinished painting of Marguerite stood on its easel. I wanted to get a sneak view of the portrait. And there they were together, Vincent and Marguerite, bold as brass. And he wasn't painting."

"And you never told Dr Gachet?"

"I know I should have. But Dr Gachet is not a healthy man and the shock could have made him much worse. I could not bring myself to tell him, Monsieur. And I could not carry on working there with such a weight on my conscience."

"Did anyone else know about it?"

Her eyes went heavenward. "I don't think so, except possibly young Paul."

"Dr Gachet's son," I confirmed. "What makes you think he could have known?"

"Because Vincent gave him some paintings."

Then the penny dropped. "And you think he was blackmailing the artist."

"I'm not sure Monsieur, but it seems the most logical explanation."

I tended to agree. This disclosure had indeed given me a substantial lead. I rose to leave. "Thank you Madame Cabonet, you have been most helpful."

"The Doctor must not know I told you. The news could kill him."

I smiled, "I will use the utmost tact."

As I walked back up Rue des Fleurs, my mind was racing. I needed to get my thoughts in order. I stopped for refreshment at the Auberge Ravoux, in the centre of the picturesque village. Half a dozen men of various ages sat around drinking wine, coffee or some other alcoholic beverage. Some were playing dominoes. I saw Joseph Roulin and wondered if he ever did get the mail delivered. He hadn't seen me before, in this version of reality, so there was no recognition between us. I wondered how I could know what the future held for me - at least the immediate future - and still be in this time frame. I made a mental note to ask Jennifer. I began to feel strange, unsettled, addled. I took deep breaths which brought me back to the present. Gradually I calmed down. It must have had something to do with mentally projecting into the future.

Arthur Ravoux served me with coffee and hot buttered croissants. As we had not yet crossed paths,

he was reasonably pleasant. More settled, I pondered on the case in hand. Both the Gachet kids were strong suspects. Marguerite and Paul Junior were both emotionally involved with Vincent Van Gogh, a man who was mentally unstable. Hell, anything could have triggered bad stuff in him. I needed to find out more about Vincent. I knew he visited prostitutes, to paint them, but was that where his relationship with them stopped?

I sipped the strong pungent coffee and saw Madeline Ravoux serve the tables. She was only fourteen, but she had modelled for Vincent. I shuddered to think what else may have happened. However, if there had been any sexual involvement between this young teenage girl and Vincent that would explain the code of silence where the artist is concerned. Perhaps Sweet Adeline had told her father about the artist's inappropriate behaviour after he had died. That would have given him a good reason to be angry and protective, where his daughter was concerned.

My mind was busy jumping to conclusions. What if there had been something going on sexually between Adeline and the artist? If Marguerite had found out about it before Vincent took a fatal gunshot wound, she may well have felt jilted and hired the killer to carry out the deed. Of course, this was all supposition on my part. But how would this timid young girl have known where to hire a killer in the first place? On reflection, it seemed much more likely that fiery young Paul would have hired a hit-man. He hated Vincent being with his sister and had to stop it before his father found out. So he hired the killer to deal with the painter. It made sense to me, but it didn't tie in with Madame Cabonet's blackmail theory. Paul would hardly have had the artist killed while he was getting free artworks from him. Damn! It was frustrating. I knew who the killer was, in at least one version of virtual reality, but still didn't know. Although I had narrowed it down to a personal vendetta, professional hit, or debt, knowing what I knew about the artist any of these motives would fit. I felt an adrenaline rush coupled with the feeling the trail was becoming hot.

Chapter 51

Since the mid-1800's, the railroad put Auvers less than an hour from Paris. Landscape painters like Daubigny and Corot, Pissarro and Cézanne, came there to paint from nature. I looked around me at where Van Gogh had spent the last weeks of his life, producing scores of paintings in a feverish burst of creativity. After painting in the village and fields, he would return to his cheap lodgings, basic room, across from the town hall, at the small inn and cafe owned by the Ravoux family. Auvers rail station was not far from the village – merely 10 minutes walking distance. And it was my next port of call.

It was a cool but pleasant evening as I strolled towards the small railway station. Apart from an outside light where horse-drawn carriages dropped off their passengers, the place was in darkness. As I walked up onto the seeming deserted platform, I saw a light ahead. It was swinging from side to side. Then I realised it was a lantern being held by somebody. The light holder turned out to be the station master.”

“What do you want?” he challenged.

“I am looking for a railway worker called Gilles,” I replied.

“Well, I am the only person here, so I cannot help you,” he said, warily.

He said, by way of explanation, “Passenger trains do not run past Auvers at night so there is no need to have anyone else on duty.”

He placed his lamp on a bench and tried to get his pipe started.

“So nobody called Gilles works here?” I queried, getting the topic back on track.

He puffed on his pipe and shook his head. “No Monsieur.”

I was becoming desperate. "Gilles has a jagged scar on his right hand. Do you know of any railway worker of that description?"

The station master was shorter than me by around six inches. The railroad employee looked up at me and demanded. "Why do you want Gilles?"

I opened my hands in a submissive gesture. "I'm not out to cause trouble. I just need to speak with your worker. Gilles works for the railway around here, or so I'm told."

The stationmaster pushed open the door of a small waiting room. It was empty. "Sometimes people try to sleep in here," he said.

"Do you know who I am talking about?" I pressed.

"The only Gilles I know of is Gilles Thierry. He's a navvy who's repairing rails over at the engine shed. He has a bit of a temper. So don't tell him I told you."

"Thank you, Monsieur. So where is this shed?"

"Gare du Pontoise."

"How far away is that?"

"About an hour by coach."

I had a quicker way to get there, but it meant taking a small detour, via the Twenty-first Century.

Chapter 52

"No, no and again no!" Jennifer persisted, as she and Nathan Goodfellow were eating at a nearby burger joint.

It was not what Nathan wanted to hear, but it was the answer he expected. But all was not lost. At least He and Jennifer were talking again, albeit only about science. He persisted, "Look, I know it sounds crazy, but he could have something."

"Even if I was inclined to try such a thing, the technology is not there to make it happen."

"Well, you're the expert."

"Not in quantum optics."

Nathan was getting nowhere. "Do you know anybody who could shed light on this?"

"Light being the operative word," she punned.

"I was thinking of running the idea by Douglas Dimmick?"

Jennifer remembered him from University "Not Professor Dimmick!"

"Why not him?"

"I have my reasons."

"I saw him just the other day, in Smith's book shop. He was telling me about the amazing work he is doing in quantum photography. A breakthrough, he says, will make digital photography a thing of the past."

"That may well be, but I don't trust him."

He cocked an eyebrow. "I didn't know you two knew each other."

“He was the head lecturer in quantum science. He was also one of the pricks who criticised my teleporting experiments and made it impossible for me to continue my work at the university.”

Nathan sat back, stunned. “My God, I never realised! ...”

“... Why should you?”

Nathan grinned cheekily. “Now you could show him. I mean if he ...”

“... I will never work with that man. End of subject!”

“Well that's a real pity, Jenny, because he knows all about this stuff,” Nathan said, dejected.

Jennifer crossed her arms, “Nathan, you are not to involve anyone else in my project. Is that clear?”

“Loud and clear. But it doesn't have to have anything to do with the project. It could be kept separate.”

“In the development stage, maybe. But there will come the point when the Q' has to be involved.”

Seeing a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel, Nathan said, “Supposing I can get Dimmick to come up with the software then you could install it, leaving him none-the-wiser about the Q'”

Jennifer took a bite of her burger. “Jennifer was very protective of her 'Quantime', wanting as few people as possible knowing about it. If word got out before the quantum physicist had all bases covered to stop any piracy attempts, she would lose control of her ingenious invention. She couldn't afford to allow that. Too much was at stake. She paused, “As long as you never mention my name or the Q' you can talk to whom you please.”

Nathan picked a few fries out of the small red and white striped box on the table. “Relax, Jen, I won't mention either you or the Q'.”

She smiled weakly, still not forgiving him for the moves he had put on her. “But that still doesn't mean I am interested.”

He paused to take a bite of his burger. “Jen, quite honestly I don't think it's possible. But just say it is, think about how actual film footage from, say, the Fourteenth Century - would be worth.”

Chapter 53

Douglas Dimmick, a scientist and mathematician, was intimately involved in the making of a 5th Dimensional Camera. The experiments were kept very hush-hush by the Physics Department of the Cambridge University. It was during the testing phase of this Camera project that Dimmick's relationship with the device – and the weird worlds it revealed – began to take an unhealthy twist. Initial experiments with dice, designed to test the range of possible outcomes captured by the camera, soon led to his ‘testing’ horse racing results. When it became apparent to him that he could find evidence of a world where any bet was a winner, his experiments rapidly became his obsession. Douglas thought he had it made.

He raised the stakes by betting significant amounts of money on small odds, then searching through images to find the world where he had just won a fortune. However, soon, the vicarious thrill of financial abundance for his other parallel selves turned to bitterness. He found the permutations to be endless, making it too difficult for him to track down the version in which the rank outsider became a champion.

Despair and jealousy led him to experiment with games that aimed to end the lives of these other selves, and ultimately his own? Having lost his winnings, his family and his home, all Douglas Dimmick had left was his teaching job, which, because of his excessive drinking, which also put that under threat.

Nathan Goodfellow, a colleague and acquaintance, found himself in the invidious position of trying to raise the hopes of the desperately depressed scientist. It was during one of these encouragement sessions, when Dimmick at least acted sober, that Nathan broached the subject of quantum photography.

Dr Douglas Dimmick looked as though he had gone to the pack. He had never been one to take pride in his appearance but, in his creased trousers and threadbare tweed jacket, he looked more dishevelled than usual. Dimmick had never cared about his appearance, even before his downfall. After all, as he put it, "We and everything else is pure illusions of light with a particular appearance." What we think of as being substantial is no more than tiny packets of energy bonding and unbonding.

Nathan hadn't seen him in weeks and, while browsing books at Smiths, was surprised to see the scientist still alive, him having threatened suicide on more than one occasion. But he looked like death warmed up. Dr Dimmick seemed to have lost all his passion concerning quantum science. Previously He had always been ready to regale anybody, who was willing to listen, with his obsession about light. But now the scientist wasn't even happy to do that. However, he did deign to speak with Nathan Goodfellow, in the shop.

Eyeing the down-at-heel scientist, Nathan said, "Douglas, I was just thinking about you the other day."

He took a step back, "My goodness, Nathan, fancy seeing you here."

"Yes, it is a fortuitous occasion."

"Why is that?"

"Well I need some info on quantum photography, and you are probably the best person for me to speak to."

"What do you want to know?"

"I'm working on a time travel game, and I want to record images back in history. I was wondering if..."

Douglas interrupted, "... It's not possible. Basically, with quantum photography, you are talking about, not only electromagnetic waves but a stream of photon particles travelling at the vacuum speed of light. Now, these particles should not be considered to be classical billiard balls, but rather as quantum mechanical particles described by a wave-function spread over a finite region."

The complex numbers mathematician, who already had some inkling of that responded, "Yes Doug, I know that. I want to know about quantum optics."

"That is what I'm explaining. Each particle carries one quantum of energy equal to hf , where h is Planck's constant and f is the frequency of the light."

"Doug, my discipline is complex adaptive systems, not advanced quantum mechanics. Can you explain it in simpler terms?"

Dr Dimmick looked morose like every word was an effort. He was not in the mood to deal with his speciality at a kindergarten level. He sighed, "Okay, the postulation of the quantization of light by Max Planck in 1899 and the discovery of the general validity of this idea in Albert Einstein's 1905 explanation of the photoelectric effect, soon led physicists to realise the possibility of population inversion and the possibility of the laser."

"Okay, Doug, perhaps I need to be more specific. What I want to know is, is it possible for me to have quantum photography software that can record images back in time?"

“Well, you know how a regular digital camera can take snaps of objects not directly visible to its lens.”

“Yes. It’s called ‘ghost imaging, isn’t it?’”

“Yes, and physicists have known for more than a decade that ghost imaging is possible. But, until now, experiments had only imaged the holes in stencil-like masks, which limited its potential applications.”

“So, have there been any improvements recently?”

“Nathan, it’s funny you should ask that, because of the University of Maryland, Baltimore, and colleagues at the US Army Research Laboratory, also in Maryland, have now taken the first ghost images of an opaque object - a toy soldier.”

“How does it work then?”

Dimmick saw a book he'd been searching for, in the remainder's bin. Grabbing it before anyone else did, he said, “Well, that’s a bit of luck,”

“What is it?” Nathan asked.

Dimmick showed him.

“‘The Golden Medicine’. What’s it about?”

Not wanting to go into it, the quantum scientist brushed it aside. “I’m in a hurry, so do you want to know about ‘ghost imaging’ or not?”

“Yes, sorry.”

“Very well, ghost imaging works a bit like taking a flash-lit photo of an object using a standard camera. There, the image forms from photons that come out of the flash bounce off an object and into the lens. The new technique also uses a light source to illuminate an object. However, the light form doesn’t hit the object and bounce back. Instead, the camera collects photons that don’t hit the object. However, the quantum effect pairs them with others that do impact with the object.”

“So, we are talking entanglement here?”

“Indeed Nathan,” he said, handing the book to the sales clerk.

Nathan, trying to milk Dimmick on the subject, said, “That’s fascinating. Now, can I throw a hypothetical at you?”

“You better be quick. I have a bus to catch.”

“Right. Now supposing you had a machine that was able to quantise reality, allowing you to go back in space-time, would a Quantum camera be able to photograph or film life back then and then produce the images in our time?”

Dimmick straightened up a little and as his face began to brighten and seemed to lose its almost permanent frown. “My goodness Nathan, what an unusual question, one I have never thought of asking. Needless to say, I don’t have an answer at my fingertips but wouldn’t it be bloody marvellous if it were at all possible.” He then laughed softly. “Of course, we’d need the quantum time machine first.”

“Another thought, I wonder would it be possible to quantize the camera that takes the quantized images, in the programming of the quantized machine?”

“My good Lord, you are full of them today, Nathan. I’ll take that on board as well.” It’s a shame

that such a quantum time machine doesn't exist.”

Nathan smiled, “I did say it was hypothetical.”

“Yes, I'll see what I can find out and get back to you,” Then he mumbled, mostly to himself, “My, what a delicious conundrum.”

Chapter 54

“It's becoming a bit tedious, Jen, when I have to come back here in order to travel just a short distance in nineteenth century France, to avoid an hour's train ride,” I complained, having returned again to Jennifer's laboratory.

Jennifer, feeling tense and annoyed, retorted, “Then why the hell didn't you just catch a train, instead of hassling me.”

She was right of course. I was just thinking of myself. “Sorry Jennifer, it's just that it would make things easier if I could make minor reprogramming details on the job, so to speak.”

“I told you, I'll see what I can achieve. It's not just like making a cup of tea, you know.”

“Sure, but I'm a smart guy. I can pick up things fast.”

“It's not just that. It means making changes to the hardware, not just the software. It's not that easy, Ossie.” She didn't let on about her primary concern, though. If Ossie had any control over the 'Q', she would lose control at her end. Jennifer was not prepared to let that happen. She needed to know of its location at any given time.

I grinned. “I know how Vincent died.”

“Was he murdered?”

“Yes - in a way.”

“In a way. Ossie. What's that supposed to mean?”

“I'm not ready to say, at present. Still got a few loose ends to tie up.”

She nudged him. “Oh, come on. You can't leave me hanging like that.”

“I'm not saying anything yet.”

She pouted a little. “I could make it worth your while,” she said, suggestively.

“We could christen this lab.”

“What makes you think I hadn't had sex in here before you came along?”

“Because, you said this was your virginal space,” he smiled lasciviously.

She grinned, “Your proposition does have some merit, young man, but only in the interests of science.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, grabbing her hips and pushing her back against the wall. I felt her body become warm and responsive to my urgency. Somehow, without breaking rhythm, we managed to divest ourselves of impeding garments, which pooled at our feet. I felt her body rippling with pleasure as I entered her. We soon picked up a rhythm in sync with each other. Within minutes our building orgasms shot into overdrive. Jennifer was thrusting hard against me. I could feel every muscle in her body focusing its energy, gripping me. She erupted with a long drawn out cry. I withdrew just in time. Her body seems to expand, then tighten down again.

“Wow! What the hell was that?” she said, catching her breath.

“I think it's what's known as a 'quantum quickie',” I said, grinning like the proverbial Cheshire cat. We laughed and adjusted our clothing, feeling like naughty children.

Chapter 55

The problem when you can be somewhere, anywhere, instantly is that you have no time to adjust to your new reality. Gare du Pontoise was before me, a cacophony of noise, steam and smoke. Being a suburban station, it's architecture made a simple statement, unlike those elaborate iron and stone structures to be seen around Paris.

My fob watch told me it was ten past eight in the morning. So I made my way to the rail yard, weaving in out of passengers, as they headed for the Paris train. The rail yard, I found out, was about 70 yards up the track, past the platform. From the end of the platform, I could see a rail gang at work.

Having been informed that I could not walk alongside the track, I had to go down the road to where the group was working. There was a small gap between two warehouses. A narrow, dusty path took me to an area where a group of workers shovelled gravel and laid down sleepers, while others hammered away at spikes. One man was watching the proceedings from a horse and buggy. I figured him to be the boss. I approached him, saying, “Excuse me but I wonder if you help me with something.”

He looked down at me. “What do you want?”

“He's probably looking for work,” a stout man of around forty, suggested.

“Then he is out of luck because we're not hiring.” The buggy man said.

I responded, “It's okay, I'm not looking for work. But I am looking for someone who may work here. The man I seek is called Gilles. I don't know his last name.”

The boss wore a vague look.

I added, “He has a jagged scar on his right hand.”

“Oh, you mean, Gilles Thierry. Here he's known as 'Hammer', he said, beaming. “He'll be laying rails, up towards the crossing.”

“Is it okay if I go and speak to him?”

“Any business you have with Hammer should be in his time. But I'll allow it this once as long as you're quick.”

“Good luck,” the stout worker said. “Hammer doesn't like being disturbed from his work.”

I wasn't looking forward to speaking with Hammer, but it was necessary. I knew of his more lucrative occupation in which, it seemed, he helped people get rid of their problems, with no questions asked. I had to make out I was a prospective client. But who was going to be 'my' problem?

When I reached the siding, I saw Gilles, muscles rippling, taking measured swipes with a massive sledgehammer, sinking the iron spike deeper into the bracket holding the rail. I walked up to the gang, most of whom looked up from their labour as I approached. Only Gilles carried on pile driving, seemingly oblivious to my interruption.

“Monsieur Thierry, can I have a minute of your time?”

He turned towards me, his face like thunder, “Who the hell do you think you are – disturbing my concentration?”

“My apologies Monsieur, but I friend suggested you might be able to help me with a problem.”

“I am working. I do not like to be disturbed when I am working. If you dare to, meet me at the Logis Le Saint Eloi tonight. If I don't like what you have to offer you will be very sorry for wasting my time.”

Then he brandished his hammer at me, gaining laughs from his fellow workers.

I discovered that the Logis Le Saint Eloi was a big, fancy hotel in Pontoise -Les-Noyon. As I was spending the day in town, I decided to learn a little about the place. The first thing that struck me was that Pontoise was one of the capitals of the impressionist movement. Testimony to this was apparent in the town's prominent art industry. It was extraordinary to peruse artworks for sale by Pissarro, Cezanne, Gauguin, Daubigny, etc. It was also in Pontoise that Nicolas Flamel, one of the most successful alchemists was born.

As fascinating as playing the tourist was, I needed a plausible story to put to Gilles when I met him later. I needed to know if he was a killer for hire. If so then I was looking for the person who got him to shoot Vincent. I believed he made a deal with Rene and his brother to provide the gun that was used to kill the artist. But I still needed to know who had hired him. I also needed to know how the Secletain boys came to know of Gilles and what had prompted them to come all the way to Auvers, especially as their father would not be happy with them going up to Paris by themselves.

Following a short hike in the Compiègne or Ourscamp forest, I arrived at Logis Le Saint Eloi, an elegantly beautiful Nineteenth Century hotel, near the centre of Noyon. I wondered why a railway worker would choose such a luxurious place to meet. Some of the clients were nursing their preferred poisons while congregating around the resident pianist, as he lulled them with his musical repertoire. It was after seven pm, and there was no sign of Gilles. It was still warm, so I ventured into the well maintained and florally impressive garden area. A dozen or so clients were eating and drinking, among them Gilles Thierry. But he was not alone. He was talking to a red-headed man, who passed a package to him. I hung back behind a camellia bush. The red-haired man got up to go. That's when I saw it was young Paul Gachet.

Gilles Thierry no longer looked like a railway worker. His quality suit and grooming fitted in well with the affluent ambience of the establishment. I sidled over to his table. “Monsieur Thierry, we met this morning.”

He looked me over. “Sit down,” he grunted.

I sat. “I believe you specialise in solving a person's personal problems. I have one that needs to be dealt with, Monsieur.”

“You are wasting my time. Get to the point.”

“Very well,” I sighed, “but this is rather delicate. My wife is seeing another man.”

He stared at me. “And how am I supposed to help?”

“This lothario deserves to be shown the error of his ways.”

he lunged across the table and grasped me by my lapels. “And how exactly am I to do that?”

Startled, I spluttered “Monsieur, I just want him to leave my wife alone.”

Other diners began taking an interest in our proceedings. Gilles let me go, brushing down my jacket. Then he laughed loudly. “That had you worried, didn't it.”

I forced a grin. "I knew it was just your sick practical joke."

Ignoring my remark, Gilles said, "It will cost you ten thousand francs. Now, who is the subject?"

"I will get back to you; once I have organised the fee," I said, hesitantly.

He took out a small notebook and fountain pen. "Write your details down so I can contact you."

"I will contact you when I am ready," I countered.

He stared hard, unnerving me. "If you're fucking me around, Monsieur you're a dead man."

Chapter 56

"When did you get here?" Jennifer said, upon entering her lab.

I yawned, "Late last night, I think."

"Why didn't you come up?"

I shrugged. "I'd kill for a coffee."

As we sat at the kitchen table, eating scrambled eggs on toast, Jennifer said, "Seriously, Ossie, why didn't you come up to bed?"

I thought about it, then said, "I guess it's because I didn't know who would be here. I mean you could have had Nathan here and ..."

"... And that would have been a problem," she challenged.

"It could have been for Nathan, especially if you two were in bed together."

Jennifer laughed, "You're jealous, Oswald Doyle."

"Well, I saw him wandering around here half naked and you just out of the shower the other day. I thought ..."

Still smirking, she interrupted, "...Ossie, I'm giving you a chance not to dig yourself in any deeper. I'd take it if I were you."

I felt like both shoes were on the wrong feet.

She said, "So, how goes it in France?"

"Great, I've hired the killer to 'off' someone for me."

Her eyes widened, "Who?"

"The lover of my cuckolded wife."

She laughed again. "Wow! You have been busy in France."

I looked at her. "Seriously, though, supposing I had gone to your bedroom and Nathan was cosied up to you, it would have been a bit uncomfortable for all concerned."

"Speak for yourself. I don't mind a bit of menage a trois occasionally."

Then she touched my arm, laughing lightly at her joke. "You should see the grave look on your face."

"Well, I fail to see what's so funny. I am a detective you know. And I detect the unspoken signals between you two."

She looked me directly in the eye. "Nathan and I are like brother and sister. True, he wants to take our relationship into the lover's phase, but I don't see him that way. He's a sweet, thoughtful guy most of the time but his not partner or even lover material for me."

I grinned. "Maybe I'm not such a good detective after all."

She looked at me. "Ossie, you have to be careful."

"And you think I don't know that."

"What I mean is that you have to be sure that the man you think killed Vincent is the same as the one you hired to kill someone else, in the same version of reality."

I sighed heavily, "Yes it's becoming difficult to keep tabs."

"How many scenarios are you starring in, currently?"

"There's the one where I'm free and progressing with my investigation; the one where I'm on a murder charge. There's also a scenario where I'm hiring the killer; and the one where I have a sexy, brilliant woman in my life." I grinned, "I think I like that one best."

"You and your French tarts," she said with mock admonishment. Then she said, "You need something to remind yourself of current reality - say a piece of coloured clothing, coded to the the particular Q' experience you happen to be having."

"What like different pairs of socks?"

"I was thinking more of coded coloured handkerchiefs folded in your blazer's breast pocket."

Chapter 57

This teleporting, particle assimilation, or whatever, was wearing me down. For the first time in many trips, I felt exhausted when I stepped from the Quantime. I was back in Arles to pick up the trail. So were two other men, whom, I discovered, were asking about me. Joseph Roulin informed me, as we sat playing dominoes at The Auberge Ravoux.

"Who were they?" I asked.

He looked vague. "Not locals. They asked me if you were married. It seemed a strange thing for them to ask."

"Yes, it was. What did you say?"

"I said I didn't know."

"Why did they ask you?"

"I don't know Monsieur. I am the mail carrier. Maybe they think I know everyone around here."

Then it made sense. Gilles was checking up on me. His probing into 'my' life was scary. "Yes, I guess that's it."

Joseph looked at me and stroked his bushy beard. Then he laid down a five-five Domino. Looking up from his game, he said, "Are you married, Monsieur Doyle?"

I avoided the question. "What did these men look like?"

"They were dressed like real gentlemen. One of them, with olive skin and dark hair, did all the talking. The Inquirer could have been Italian. But the other one, the mostly silent one, he looked as though he would slit your throat as soon as look at you. I wouldn't want to tangle with that one."

I didn't want to tangle with them, full stop.

Joseph said, "It is your move."

I couldn't concentrate on the game and left him to it.

It seemed to me that Gilles Thierry lived two separate lives, and he was much better organised than I thought. Of course, it made perfect sense that you would want to know everything was kosher with your clients when you killed people for a living. However, it seemed odd that a notorious contract killer hadn't achieved much of a footnote in history. Perhaps he'd never been caught. Or maybe he had been protected by influential persons. Or perhaps Gilles Thierry wasn't his real name. However, this confusion was the least of my worries, which became very real later that day.

I was walking through a park, enjoying the afternoon sunshine while pondering over the case. Now that I knew Gilles Thierry was responsible for at least two murders, one in which Vincent Van Gogh was fatally wounded, mostly I'd completed my investigation. I could give Theo my report and leave the Nineteenth Century before I became one of Gilles' problems.

However, fool that I am, I decided to hang around to tie up one loose end. I had to find out why young Paul Gachet was paying Thierry. Was it for Vincent or Pierre? I had to speak with young Paul. As I walked to the park exit, I worked out a plan to get him to talk to me. But before I had a chance to do so, an Italian looking guy with very dark greasy hair confronted me.

"Mr Doyle, I presume."

From Joseph's description, this was one of Gilles' goons. He'd probably been by his master to check my story. "And who are you?" I asked, with as much confidence as I could muster.

"That doesn't matter. Gilles Thierry wants to know why you lied to him."

I froze. Recovering, I said, "What are you talking about?"

He stared at me. "If you do not cooperate, I have a colleague who is an expert at getting people to talk. I can call him over here and save time. So why did you say you were married when it is evident, from my enquiries that you are not?"

"What do you mean?"

"I am asking the questions Monsieur. You have one more chance to keep this friendly."

I had to think on the hop. "My wife is in England."

He thought about this. "And your wife's lover?"

"Yes, that Lothario is in England as well."

He was silent for a moment. Then he grabbed my arm, "Come with me Monsieur."

"Why? Where are we going?" I asked, nervously.

His firm grip on my arm propelled me into a narrow lane way. I didn't like this one bit. Then the silent thug came out of the shadows, a menacing look on his unshaven face. "Hold him tight."

This situation was getting more dangerous by the second. With the talker's attention drawn to his partner for a second, the man's grip loosened momentarily. Grabbing this opportunity, I broke away and ran up the lane, with the two thugs panting in hot pursuit.

The smaller one was gaining. I had nowhere to go. I needed a weapon. But If I slowed down to pick up something the thugs would be upon me. I headed for an open gate to the left. With a lead of just a few feet, I ran through, swinging the gate shut behind me. I gained perhaps four or five precious

seconds. There was a cottage ahead. I was at serious risk of being trapped. I grasped the back door knob and twisted. The door was locked. There was a gunshot. Fuck! They were armed. I raced round the cottage, gasping for breath. 'Press the fucking crystal!', my mind screamed. There was a garden shed. Maybe there was something I could use to defend myself. I headed for it. So did thug number two, and he was gaining. I entered just before he got there. I had to use something – anything. A spade. I frantically grabbed the garden implement and swung it at him. He lunged at me, instinctively shielding his head. In the panic, my aim was off. I struck his arm above the elbow. He grunted and ripped the spade out of my hands. Now I was trapped in a small garden shed with a madman who certainly wasn't there to discuss horticulture. Luckily the little space impeded him as well. In the confined space we struggled, and I tried to land solid punches. He proved much fitter and stronger. I was flailing and failing. He landed a couple of hard body blows, winding me; thrusting me against a shelf. Pot plants and other gardening stuff hit the concrete floor, only seconds before I did.

Dragged unceremoniously out onto the grass, looking at my pathetic state, one of the thugs slowly shook his head. He said, "Monsieur Doyle, such unpleasantness could have been avoided," he smiled, as he planted his foot viciously into my ribs.

I winced at the sharp pain. My thought was, should I press the pendant? My mind responded, 'For fuck sake, yes!'

"My client does not carry out work overseas. You should have Monsieur Thierry the case was in England," thug one snarled, planting another kick.

I coughed, fearing for my life. There was no one around to help me. I was at the mercy of these animals.

"And this is for wasting our time; thug two said," putting his boot in hard.

That was it. I reached for the crystal. Then, in my semi-conscious, agonised state, I heard a voice. "What's going on here? Why are you people fighting in my garden?"

Thug one, turning to the smartly attired middle-aged man, said, "We caught him trying to steal your tools. We were going to take him to the police. Now you can do it."

"Stealing my tools. Well, I never did. What is this world coming to?"

I looked up at the gentleman, pathetically, unable to offer any explanation in my defence.

The two thugs decided it was time to exit.

The well-dressed man looked down at me. "You seem in a bad way, Monsieur," he said, sympathetically, helping me to my feet. "You'd better come into the house."

"I should report you to the police," The kindly man said, making me comfortable in his home. "But I'm willing to hear your version of events, because, honestly, what the other two men said made no sense to me."

Still feeling groggy and aching from the beating, I said, "Thank you for coming along when you did. Those two would have killed me."

He appraised my soiled but quality attire. "You don't look like the sort of person who needs to steal garden tools, Monsieur."

"I wasn't. Those thugs were chasing me. I ran into your yard to get away from them."

"Why were they chasing you?" the middle-aged man asked.

I thought quickly. "I owed those people money and couldn't pay."

“So who is going to pay for the damage to my shed and plants, Monsieur?”

“That I think I can afford, Monsieur,” I said, smiling painfully.

He offered me tea, and we talked for hours. Well, he did most of the talking, especially about Arles, where he had lived most of his life. Since the death of his wife he had been a very private man, spending most of his time in his garden. He seemed a lonely soul and was only too ready to talk to a willing listener.

At some point I interrupted, saying, “Did you ever meet the artist Vincent Van Gogh?”

“The Dutchman with the straw hat.”

“That sounds like him – yes.”

“A strange but kindly man. We spoke one day when he came back from the fields. He was very depressed.”

I became interested. “How did you know that?”

“The way he slumped, what he said.”

“What did he say to you?”

“That nobody had ever really understood him, and now he didn't get it himself and his compulsion to paint when nobody wanted his art.”

I sat up straight. “Vincent told you that, a perfect stranger he had never encountered before.”

He nodded, “Sometimes it's easier to talk to strangers, like me to you.”

“When did this encounter occur?”

“I remember it distinctly because of the next day he cut off his ear. I wondered if I could have done something. Offered some magical words to comfort him. But I didn't know what to say. Then he mutilated himself.”

“Surely you don't blame that on your inability to help relieve him of whatever weight he carried around.”

“No, of course not, Monsieur Doyle. It's just the sense of helplessness I felt.”

I wanted to tell this man, who had been baring his soul to me, what had happened. But I could not. Instead, I just listened to him tell his sad story.

As I left, never to see him again, he said, “Thank you for listening. I am pleased we met.”

As I shook his hand, I grinned, “Yes, but different circumstances would have been preferable.”

Chapter 58

Jennifer Smethurst was running late for the meeting in suite 390 in the Chevington Hotel. Only five people were there, each for their own reasons. Alfred Adcock, CEO of ADTEC, a European company specialising in ground-breaking and sometimes controversial bio-tech research, had arranged the private meeting, to bring Professor Smethurst together with potential backers for her Q' project. The time had come for her to dip her toe into the water of the commercial world. The luxury suite had a well appointed mini-bar, which had already been put to good use.

Xavier Contrello, the chief executive of the Marshall Merchant Bank, knocked back his scotch. Checking his gold Cartier watch, he grumbled, “Where has the woman got to?”

Gerard Fox, also concerned, played it down. "I'm sure she will be here very soon."

Just then the door burst open and Jennifer, harried, rushed in. "Sorry I'm late," she smiled, nervously.

Xavier, on his second mini Johnny Walker, brandished the folder in front of him. "Professor, this report says you've carried out successful experiments with mice. When do we get to see such an experiment?"

Gerard Fox, Jennifer's solicitor, said, "We just need to deal with the preliminary paperwork then we can all witness the experiment."

Martine Trove head of the quantum science faculty of City University, said, "I not entirely happy with committing us to anything before seeing what we are committing ourselves to."

Gerard smiled "That's perfectly reasonable Martine. But this is merely a confidentiality clause. Nothing to concern yourself about. As you can understand we do not want the media to get a whiff of this until we are ready for it."

Contrello stroked his Zappata moustache. "I see here that you have come up with a figure of ten billion Euros for this Q' device. How do you justify such an enormous sum?"

Fox interceded, "The Q' is unique and priceless but we had to come up with a figure commensurate with its massive potential. Plus we only want serious investors who are in it for the right reasons."

"Which are?" the boss of ADTEC asked.

Fox was about to answer but Jennifer stilled him. She said, "Gentlemen, my Q' has an untapped potential for good. I want it used for peaceful applications that can help everybody. I believe that in the right hands, it can help humanity solve many global problems."

"How so?" Martin asked.

"There is something about this technology I haven't explained. The concept of 'space travel' in terms of particle assimilation is brand new. In fact, as far as I know only I have any real understanding because I am the only person to have carried out successful experiments in this new and exciting field. However, there is another and, I believe, far reaching aspect to this."

"Which is?" Martine Trove pressed.

"I have discovered that the Q' not only re jigsaws reality in terms of space-time. it also materialises particle assimilation by way of parallel particle reality."

Adcock, who had not said much so far, whistled. "Sounds impressive professor but what the hell does it mean?"

"Okay, for example, science has recently pondered over the possibility that there could be a model of the world in which cancer has been cured. If we could access such a reality we could find out how and apply it to this reality, we are all experiencing now. Just imagine the power this would give us to find and use solutions to all global problems."

All in the room were silent. Then Xavier said, "So how do you propose to get this information - use intelligent mice?"

This remark caused some merriment.

Jennifer huffed, "You may think this a joke but if an agency like NASA takes 'Quantime space assimilation technology' on board, people could be trained like astronauts. Mind you, it would make the moon landing seem like a walk in the park by comparison."

“What would you call these intrepid adventurers – spacenauts?” Xavier quipped.

More merriment.

Jennifer glared at Xavier, “Mr Contrello, if you think this is some kind of joke I don't see how we can do business.” She grabbed her files and turned to leave.

Fox quickly intervened. “Let's not be too hasty here. Different people respond to extraordinary scientific and technological breakthroughs in different ways.” He knew that having Xavier on board would be a huge bonus. Jennifer could be temperamental and he couldn't let her blow her and his big chance, through some petty point scoring.

Afterwards, when She and Gerard Fox were alone, enjoying a relaxing drink in the Chevington bar and grill, Jennifer said, “This is what I was afraid of. Letting those cretins anywhere near the Q' is courting disaster.”

The solicitor smiled, “Don't let those bores get you down. I think that today's exercise has been very useful. We know, from their responses and questions, which holes have to be plugged in the contract.”

“I need to be involved at all stages, Gerard. Any changes have to be run by me, with your guidance, of course.”

He raised his glass and chinked it against hers. “Here's to a fruitful partnership and a very wealthy future for both of us.” She smiled wanly, “I would rather offer my Q' to the world, than have it in the hands of fat-cats who will limit its potential as a purely commercial enterprise.”

Believe you me, Jennifer, you do not want to get caught up in government bureaucracy, especially in something they can't understand.”

Chapter 59

I was both surprised and dismayed that Jennifer was not at home. I was beginning to adjust more quickly upon leaving the Quantime. I tried her number but she wasn't answering. Then I phoned Nathan but only got his absence message. She hadn't left any note. But then why should she? She had no idea when I would return. I made a coffee and sat down to relax. Particle assimilation still took it out of me and soon I was snoring peacefully, oblivious of anything.

“How long have you been here?” Jennifer asked, surprised to find me asleep in her home.

I woke with a start. “Oh, er, what time is it now?”

“Seven pm. What are you doing here?”

“Just checking in. That and I have something to run by you.”

“Look Ossie, I don't know if I'm up to this right now. I've been in a business meeting for three hours and I'm fucked.”

“I'm just answering your question,” I responded tersely.

“Can it wait? At least till I have something to drink,” she said, kicking off her shoes.

“Do you want me to make a coffee?” I offered, rising to my feet.

“A whisky would be good.”

“Yes, I could do with one myself.”

As I sat swirling the golden liquid around in the glass I thought it only prudent to ask, “So, how did

your business meeting go?"

Jennifer, having changed into comfortable shoes, was now lying back on the lounge, her back propped against several pillows. She said, "They want a showing before they will start talking numbers."

"What? For the Quantime technology?"

"Of course. I have nothing else to trade."

I openly appraised her feminine attributes. With a grin I said, "Oh I don't know about that."

She grabbed the nearest thing at hand - a science magazine and threw it. "You cheeky bastard."

It just missed my head. I laughed, "Wow! You're deadly with a science journal at ten paces."

Jennifer laughed for the first time that day.

It was good to see her lighten up.

She said, "So tell me, why you are here?"

Still in a mischievous mood, I responded, "I've missed you so much. I just needed to be close to you."

"And what else?" she asked, very serious again.

"Okay, here's the thing. You told me that I mustn't change anything in the past. Right?"

"Yes."

"Well, I just got beaten up in France, by a couple of the murderous thugs."

Her eyes widened, "Are you okay?"

"Yes. The healing powers of the Quantime are amazing."

She chewed her lip. "I don't know about that, Ossie. It's more the case that those injuries belonged back then."

"I guess they had over one hundred years to heal."

"Smart arse."

Then it hit me. "I must have belonged back there," I blurted. "Which means that whatever I did was meant to happen and didn't mess up space-time."

"I'm not sure that it is as simple as that."

"I tried explaining what I meant. "In the Quantime reality everything is in the present - right?"

"Yes, in theory."

"Then how can something changed in the present affect anything in the non-existent past?"

She sat up straight. "I think I can see where you you are going with this. What you seem to be saying is that the rules to do with changing something in the past do not apply where the Q' is concerned."

"What I'm saying, Jennifer, is that parallel assimilations suggest that all possible scenarios exist simultaneously and we choose which version to experience."

She smiled, "Give me an example."

“Okay, I know a man is going to be murdered. Now, I can either try to prevent the crime taking place or I can believe I must not change or impact on a past timeline.”

“Are you suggesting that there are models in which the victim is murdered or not murdered?”

“Sure, so if I venture into a scenario in which I intervene, that results in no murder taking place, am I altering anything or am I just part of that particular reality?”

She looked me in the eye, saying, “You amaze me Ossie. These are very deep philosophical questions that may never have been answered before, or even asked, for that matter.”

I fixed her in my gaze. “This is not just an academic conundrum, Jennifer. I am faced with the very situation right now and I need to know what to do.”

She nibbled on her lip again. “It seems to me that we are writing our own rules as we go. So just go with your gut instinct. But you can't change assimilations mid stream. You have to follow events through in the same space-time, which means you have to be aware that many things may be different for you.”

Jennifer and I had been cosyng up all evening, watching the Jodie Foster movie, Contact, when Nathan arrived around nine pm. He seemed very excited about something. I wasn't so thrilled about him just turning up though.

“Hi Nathan,” Jennifer greeted with a warm hug. “What brings you here this night?”

“I have some amazing news.”

“Well, come on in. I could do with some good news,” she said.

Nathan hesitated when he saw me, His eyes said everything. “Hey, Jen I didn't know Oswald would be here. Maybe I'd better go.”

As he turned tail, Jennifer said “No, Nathan, we're not doing anything important. Come on in and sit down. I want to hear your news.”

Nothing important! I huffed inwardly. I said, “What news?”

“We have the technology.”

“For what?”

“Filming back in time.”

Jennifer sat open mouthed, as did I. She asked, “Are you serious?”

“In theory it's possible. We use a quantum camera that takes ghost images.”

“Ghost images,?” I queried.

“It's got something to do with reflecting photons becoming entangled in pairs. Look, I'll have to get Douglas Dimmick to explain it, if you are at all interested.”

“Who the hell is this Douglas Dimmock?” I asked, suspiciously.

Jennifer frowned. “Nathan, you haven't told him about the Q', have you?”

“No Jen, of course I haven't. But he will find out when he installs the software.”

Jennifer exploded, “Installs the software! He's not coming anywhere near the Q!”

I said, “So who is this guy.”

She answered, "My nemesis from my uni days, come back to haunt me, it seems. I don't like this, Nathan. He's an arrogant prig"

"Not any more, Jennifer. He's hit rock bottom and needs a hand up. He has the technology. We have the means to launch his genius."

I didn't much like the sound of this Dimmick character. "Why is he your nemesis?"

Jennifer passed over my inquiry. "What have you told him, Nathan?"

"It's what he told me that is important," Nathan responded.

Jennifer said, "These ghost images. What else did he say about them?"

"He said to imagine a geographical place throughout history. And imagine photographs being taken at each point or change. A Quantum camera would take ghost images but instead of them being frozen in time they would be fixed in moments in space."

I was very suspicious. "And this Douglas character, he can actually do this?"

"Yes, he claims he can. And if anybody can, Douglas can," Nathan encouraged. He added, "Seriously guys, can we let an opportunity like this slip by. Imagine having images from of a place from any point in time."

I was secretly pleased as it was my idea. I asked, "Do you know this Douglas very well, Nathan. Can he be trusted to keep this quiet?"

Jennifer eyed me fiercely. "That's for me to worry about."

I sensed she was afraid I was trying to take over the project. I was a bit peeved though. "Of course it is Jennifer, it's your project. I'm just the guinea pig."

The withering look she gave me suggested I had just made things much worse between us.

Ignoring me, she said, "I suppose people can change. Can you set up a meeting?" She quickly added, "I'm not having him come here."

I said, "So this quantum camera that records these reflected ghost images, is it real?"

Nathan answered, "It's real insofar as it has a form, albeit a light one, and records images."

"So basically, we're talking about a holographic camera that able to take holographic pictures."

"I guess so," Nathan agreed.

"Wow! That would be something." I gasped.

Chapter 60

This was the day I witnessed the argument between Gilles Thierry and Pierre Doucan. And this was also the day I was arrested for murder. I had mere hours to shore up a sound alibi, but as I didn't have one the last time I was in this reality, how could I do so now? That's if I was in the same model of reality. Whatever the case I had to work out my next move. I figured that if I got to Doucan first and warned him I might be able to save his life. And if he was not murdered, I couldn't be charged with his crime. The way I figured it, all I had to do was go to the scene of the murder before it took place and warn the carriage driver. Of course this would only work if both the murder and my arrest followed the same timeline. I just had to take the chance.

But that's where it became complicated, because such an action would change history, which is a time/traveller no, no. But we're not actually talking time travel here. I'm involved in 'space' travel,

or, as no actual travel, as we understand it, takes place, space arrival seems more appropriate. In space travel, quantime-wise, there is potentially an infinite number of permutations as parallel assimilations. This gave me the weird idea that changing history does not matter because all versions exist simultaneously. So whatever actions I take will just create another version. In which case the idea of violating some kind of universal time law does not apply. Anyway that's my current adding up of this whole weird technology.

I waited in the same spot that I had hidden before. As far as I could recall everything seemed to be the same - the weather, the light, the scenery etc. Then, in the distance I saw a horse and trap approaching. It wasn't a phaeton, so it was unlikely to be Monsieur Doucan driving it. Much to my surprise and disdain it was Gilles Thierry. I shrunk back in the shadows, trying to avoid detection. This was not going well. I fingered the pendant around my neck. If I was going to make a quick exit, now was the time. But something stopped me. A man was going to be killed and I may just be able to prevent it. Maybe it had already been written and maybe history could not be changed. But how could I stand by or run away and just let it happen? It may have been a dumb decision but I just had to take my chances.

I waited out of sight, wondering when and how I would make my move. I realised meeting with Gilles Thierry before had been a mistake, especially if he recognised me. This whole time shift thing can be confusing. Then it dawned on me. Of course he wouldn't recognise me because we had not met yet. In any case I decided to stay put and see what happened. I scanned the road, up and down, but there was no sign of Pierre Doucan's phaeton. Perhaps in this scenario he doesn't turn up. I wasn't to know.

Shortly afterward, I saw a carriage and horses approaching. It was Monsieur Doucan. If I had run out madly waving for him to stop, anything could have happened. He may have recognised me from earlier in the day and stopped for me, that is if we had actually met before in this version of reality. Then there was the question that if I took that action, would I be affecting history? Or would I merely be playing my scripted part in a different version of history? There again I might be creating a whole new version. My mind fairly boggled.

Then I saw Thierry wave him down. Doucan reined in his team and halted a few metres from where the killer stood. It occurred to me, and strangely so, that I was seeing a dead man in another reality. This gave me pause for thought about the whole concept of life and death.

I watched as Doucan walked towards where Thierry waited. As the killer did not attempt to move, it showed the driver to be the supplicant in this unfolding tableau. They greeted each other. As before, I could not hear their words but their gestures spelled out the story. Thierry held his hand out, as though expecting to receive something - probably money. Doucan handed over a package and gestured in a way that suggested he expected to receive something in return. The killer took a package out of his pocket and teased Doucan, or appeared to do so. Doucan was not amused and went to grab it. A struggle ensued. For me it was now or never. If I didn't act quickly Doucan would be dead.

With heart pounding I raced towards them, yelling, "WATCH OUT PIERRE, HE HAS A KNIFE!" This got their attention.

Thierry stared at me fiercely, instantly producing a knife from his left boot. "Monsieur, I do not know who you are but you will regret this interruption, he snarled, thrusting the blade towards my chest. My basic self-defence training with the police kicked in. I quickly side-stepped as the knife blade sliced air where my heart had been a moment before. Then I heard a shot and Thierry stood still, as though frozen in time. His eyes showed surprise. Then he collapsed to the ground.

Pierre stood staring at me, the pistol wavering in his hand. "He would have killed us, Monsieur," he offered as justification for his actions.

I was stunned. This was not the way it was supposed to go. As I stood transfixed, Pierre stooped to the dead man and rifled around in his pockets until he produced the small package he wanted. He also retrieved the money he had paid Thierry. "He won't need this now," he said coldly.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," I mumbled, trying to make sense of the situation.

He looked at me. "Why did you warn me, Monsieur?"

"I can't explain. I just had a feeling that's all."

He came close and made to embrace me. "Monsieur, I have no idea who you are but you may have saved my life."

I said, "Yes, but you killed him, Monsieur Doucan."

He looked at me fearfully. "Monsieur, you know my name and have seen what I have done." he raised the pistol and pointed it towards me. "I am sorry Monsieur"

I was stunned. He aimed to kill me. "No!" I cried, my hand instinctively flying to the pendant around my neck. The next thing I know I am in the Quantime, my heart pounding in my chest. That was the closest I have ever been to being killed. Another few seconds and I would have been finished. Somehow the Quantime saved me but left me a trembling mess.

Chapter 61

Eventually, I realised that I was back in Jennifer's laboratory. It was safe for me to go outside. No gunman was waiting for me.

"God! It scares the hell out of me when you do that."

It was Jennifer's voice. Startled, she said, "I wish you wouldn't do that."

Her facial colour was as pale as mine. "Do what?"

"Arrive here without some announcement." Then she said, "Maybe I can fit it the Q' with some ring-tone, for it to announce its appearance."

I staggered over to her desk and slumped in an office chair.

"My God Ossie, you look like you have seen a ghost."

"Yes, and it was very nearly mine."

"What on earth happened?"

"I had to make an emergency exit," I said, breathlessly. "I was about to be murdered."

"Christ!" she exhaled. "Who tried to kill you?"

"The guy I was trying to save."

The way she looked at me sent a chill up my spine. "Exactly what happened," she demanded.

"I warned somebody that a man with a secreted knife was about to kill him. Then it all went crazy. Instead of him being the victim he shot other the man dead. I had no idea that was going to happen. Then, because I knew his name, the man with the gun was going to shoot me. That's when I made a very quick exit."

Jennifer frowned heavily. She slowly shook her head. "This is appalling news, Ossie. You deliberately changed the course of history, causing God knows what kind of disturbance in the space-time matrix."

Surprised at her sudden fearfulness, I said, "But we discussed this last time I was here. You agreed that those rules applied to time travel, not space travel."

"As a quantum potential - yes. But you are experiencing life in the material realm, not the Quantum one. I will need to know all the data about the lives of those two men, starting with their names."

"But why? How do you know that I wasn't meant to be part of that particular tableau?"

"If you were, you would have grabbed something to defend yourself with, not jump aboard a quantum space assimilator."

I still wasn't sure about that. So, how do you know the Q' wasn't supposed to be there?"

"Because, from the time you gave a warning it was your show and you were and are responsible for everything that happened in it."

"But that particular parallel assimilation already existed, else how could I been part of the experience?"

She sighed heavily and looked at me with degrees of pity and annoyance. "Ossie, you did not just happen upon a scenario, you created it. It is now a version of history that will endure for all time, and there is nothing you can do about it."

Becoming annoyed, I responded "But it's a parallel reality! So what difference does it make? History before I became involved, still exists as it is."

she nibbled on her lip. "I'm not so sure about that. Ossie. What happened when you disappeared before the killer's eyes?"

She had a point. I hadn't considered that. Pierre Doucan must have been freaked out. In my defence, I ventured, "If I hadn't have disappeared from him, I would be dead."

"Okay, That's a persuasive argument. I wonder if you would only be dead in that parallel assimilation."

"Maybe. But even so, dead men can't activate the Quantime. I'd be caught up in some virtual death in a virtual version of 19th Century France - trapped for eternity, unable to experience the real me."

Jennifer became pensive. "How can we know if that is true?" Then she brightened, "We need to carry out an experiment."

I didn't like the sound of that. "What sort of experiment?"

"Take a mouse with you next time. Kill it in France. Then come back here and we will see if the mouse exists or not."

"But if I kill a mouse from here and now, back there, won't that be altering history?"

"She frowned, "Maybe not if the mouse still exists in this parallel space-time."

It was all too much for my feeble brain to contemplate. "All I can say is that I'm glad I'm alive and back here."

Later that evening, as we dined on Jennifer's delicious home-made soup and crusty bread, I said, "Now that business is over, maybe we can relax and watch a movie together."

"Not tonight," she answered wearily. "It's been a bastard of a day, and I need an early night."

I yawned, "Yeah, not a bad idea. I'll grab a shower and join you in bed."

The look she gave me would have put Circe to shame. "How dare you assume you have the right to

sleep in my bed? How bloody arrogant!”

The best thing at that moment would have been to apologise for being a sexist pig. But I immediately got out my shovel. “I just thought that ...”

“... I don't give a shit what you thought.” she retorted vehemently, slamming her soup spoon down in her dish. “You're lucky I'm letting you stay here at all. So shut up and don't push your luck.”

My mind screamed 'fuck you, lady! How dare you talk to me like that?' Luckily my mouth said nothing. But I was pissed off and probably showed it. The rest of the meal would have had a polar bear freezing. Afterwards, we skulked off, going our separate ways, with me confined to the settee once more.

Sometime during the night I awoke from a nightmare, in a sweat. My heart was thumping like a drum in my chest. I had just been facing a gun held by a giant mouse, and the necklace was missing from around my neck. I lay there, in the dark fearful and alone. I felt a like scared child. I must have screamed in my sleep because Jennifer came into the room.

“Are you Okay Ossie?” she said, touching my shoulder.

I looked at her with bleary eyes. I made light of my scary experience and brushed it off. “Yeah. It was just a stupid dream.”

She yawned and wrapped her arms around herself for warmth. “Well, if you must scare yourself try to have a quieter nightmare next time.”

I said, “Yeah. Sorry for waking you up.” Then I added, “And sorry for being a chauvinist pig.”

“Yes you were,” she said, turning round and leaving the room and me to a lonely uncomfortable night. But I wasn't as uncomfortable as I would be once I was again in the clutches of the French gendarmerie. I couldn't put off my incarceration any longer.

Chapter 62

I found myself back in the Arles lock-up.

Paul Gardet brought Ossie me some onion soup with hard bread. “It's not that tasty, but it is sustaining.” He then said, “Soon they will come and take you to Paris.”

I was not looking forward to that. But I had to return to gaol to right my wrong. I knew that in this version of reality, Doucan was still the victim, with me charged with his murder. I realised my mistake. I had thought I would be able to mix parallel experiences, but even the Quantime did not allow such a process to happen. It turns out that if I run into a problem, in a particular version of reality, I must also find the solution in that same picture. There are no short-cuts or changing horses mid-stream. Albert Einstein is alleged to have said: “The consciousness that creates a problem cannot be the consciousness that finds a solution.” While I go along with this premise, Albert had not factored in parallel consciousness, which seems to be a whole new ball game for the mind. With almost identical assimilations, it seems we cannot mix and match, and problems and solutions all have to manifest within their particular space-time experience. Hence I had to return to gaol in France to be able to find the solution. It sucks, but I could see no other way around it.

Joseph Amano, chief of The Arles police department, had me brought back to the interrogation room. I wondered why if they were going to send me to Paris. I entered the room expecting the worst. I spent, what seemed an age, but was no more than ten minutes, on tenterhooks, as I waited for my accusers to arrive.

The Grey-haired police chief came in and approached me. “Monsieur Doyle, we have proof that you were in Ave de Beaucaire around the time of the murder. Do you deny this?”

My mind was racing. What kind of proof, I wondered. “Yes, of course, I was there. I already told you I witnessed Pierre Doucan being stabbed by Gilles Thierry.”

He sat looking at me, stroking his pencil thin moustache with thumb and forefinger. Then he said, “A witness has come forward and stated that she saw you there but that you did not commit the crime.”

My sense of relief knew no bounds. My huge sigh must have been audible for all within earshot to hear. “And did this mystery witness finger Thierry for this horrendous crime?”

“That has nothing to do with you Monsieur. You are free to go. But do not leave Arles, as you will be a witness.”

“So now you don't want to run me out of town,” I responded, with a degree of smugness, unable to stop myself.”

He glared at me. “Get out until you are needed.”

As a gendarme escorted me from the room, I turned, asking, “Who was the witness that corroborated my story?”

“That's confidential.”

“I just want to thank him or her. That's all.”

Waving his arm in a dismissive gesture, Amano said, “Just get out.”

I did. With lots of gratitude and curiosity as to whom, my saviour was. Could it have been Annie Besant, I wondered?

Chapter 63

Dr Douglas Dimmick didn't mind women scientists as lab assistants working under the male staff. But he couldn't stand the intelligent ones, who made him feel intellectually inferior. Jennifer Smethurst fitted right into that category. She'd already had something of a maverick reputation when he had joined the university physics faculty. On top of this, Jennifer remained very aloof about her work. Dimmick had spied on her and discovered she had been carrying out secret lab work at night. When he had questioned her about it, she explained, quite innocently, that she was carrying out teleporting experiments. Apart from being derisive about Dr Smethurst he had reported her for using university resources for her ends, for which the board of faculty members severely reprimanded her.

Dr Dimmick had been the only person she had told about her extra-curricular research and a cold distance existed between them. From that time on, her reputation as a serious and rigorous scientist got diminished in the eyes of the university. Worse, they started keeping tabs on her. They had begun to consider her a bit of a wild card, in quantum science circles – not a team player. It had become too uncomfortable for her to remain there, so she brought her tenure to a close. And she blamed Douglas Dimmick for her downfall.

So meeting with him again was not a comfortable experience, to say the least. The only way she could cope with seeing him again was by her taking at least partial responsibility for her dramatic downfall. Some faculty members had found her quantum theories exciting, and more than one of her colleagues had wanted to nominate her for a Nobel Prize in quantum physics. Perhaps if she had not rocked the academic boat, she might have been a contender. She might even have become a Physics hall of fame candidate, sharing accolades with such notables as Newton, Einstein, Bohr and Ohm. But her single-minded passion for time/ travel and its ramifications had gotten the better of her and she couldn't cope with the rigorous, restrictive, repetitive discipline required of a classical quantum physicist.

Douglas too felt intimidated and uncomfortable at the prospect of meeting Professor Smethurst again. After the rough way he'd treated her before, he was very guarded. Dr Dimmick expected her to be a bitter emotional wreck. But when he entered the restaurant which Nathan Goodfellow had organised as the rendezvous point for the three of them, the down-at-heel optical laser physicist was very surprised to see the attractive blond woman, in conversation with his friend.

She, on the other hand, was very guarded as the man wearing a poorly fitted, creased suit and badly scuffed loafers, approached her and Nathan.

Nathan rose, saying, "Douglas, I believe you and Professor Smethurst already know each other." A dumb question but he had to break the ice with something.

She didn't rise. She just said, "Nathan stated that you know something about quantum photography."

'Something!' his mind screamed. "I happen to be one of the major minds on the subject, yes." He sat down. Then he said, "It's a pleasure to meet you again after all these years. I was amazed that Nathan knew you as well."

As well as what? She wondered. Perhaps the crazy bitch who thought she could make a time machine. "I'm surprised you remembered me at all," she said, thinking, you're the creep that dobed me in.

"Oh, I remember you alright. So, what are you up to these days, Professor?"

"Let's order lunch then talk," Jennifer suggested.

As they ate burgers and chips with side salads, Douglas asked, Jennifer, "What do you know about controlling photonic and material states and processes down to the quantum level?"

She thought it an odd question, like asking a maestro composer about the tune, chopsticks. He must be testing her, she reasoned. She replied, "I'm not interested in controlling and manipulating physical systems to exhibit manifestly quantum mechanical effects, such as quantum correlations and Quantum interference. Why do you ask?"

Nathan was lost and concentrated on eating his lunch.

Dimmick, having sized Jennifer up, pressed, "What are you interested in then?" Then, as a snide aside. "Still into time travel, perhaps?"

Ignoring his barb, she responded, "Let me just say I'm way beyond computing, to uncover the subtle role Quantum mechanics plays in natural phenomena."

Dimmick's eyebrows raised. "Are you saying you are working directly with individual Quantum systems?"

Nathan, amused at the mental jousting between the pair, put his virtual money on Jenny.

"Is that only as far as your department has progressed?" she asked, pointedly, taunting him.

Becoming angry, he retorted, "My focus is a topic of crucial importance in fields ranging from quantum chemistry and biochemistry to the study of exotic materials such as graphene, high-temperature superconductors and carbon nanostructures."

"Fed up with baiting him, she said, "Nathan tells me you say it is possible to create a Quantum camera using ghost images. Tell me about that."

With an unspoken where-have-you-been look, Dimmick said, "We've been working with 'Ghost imaging' for over a decade. It works a bit like taking a flash-lit photo of an object using a regular

camera. Photons that come out of the flash form the images. There, the image forms from photons that come out of the flash, bounce off an object and into the lens.”

Jennifer said, “So the image, formed from light, hits the object and bounces back.”

Feeling superior, Douglas said, “No. The camera collects photons that do not hit the object. Paired through a Quantum effect, they entangle with others that do so.”

Becoming animated, she asked, “So would it be possible for a Quantum camera to take photographs of the past?”

Intrigued, he rubbed his stubbled chin. “Well now, a camera works in any suitable environment wherever you place it. So if you had some magic spell that could put it at any time in history, in theory at least, it would be possible to record ghost images from that time.”

Jennifer looked at the dishevelled scientist. Was it worth divulging her invention to him? He was the last person she wanted working with her on the project. He had belittled her in the past and, by his 'magic spell' comment, it looked as though nothing much had changed during the intervening years. “Are you suggesting such a technology is not possible?”

“As a theory, time travel has many proponents, but no scientist, as far as I know, has been able to prove a working hypothesis.”

Jennifer had to phrase her response very carefully, so as not to lose him but, at the same time not give too much away. “Okay, so let us say, hypothetically, that we have a device that can elevate particle reality, through deconstruction and reconstruction, so that an observer can experience and record information from any particular historical space-time scenario.”

Dimmick put down his coffee cup and looked straight at her. “Is this what you are working on, Professor?” he said, trying to hide his sneer.

“I said hypothetically ?”

He grinned, “If you like.” not believing a word of it.

“Okay, let's say I am researching into the possibility of particle assimilation in different space-time scenarios. And let's say we have evidence that the technology works but without visual proof, this is so it is tough to prove. Hence, the photography aspect.”

Dimmick, sitting back in his seat, a smile playing on his lips, grinned. “It certainly sounds intriguing. So what do you need from me?”

Jennifer wasn't exactly sure herself. “Can you build a Quantum camera?”

“Yes, but what will it connect to?”

She took a deep breath, “My prototype particle assimilator.”

His eyes became saucers. “Are you telling me you have built one of those things?”

“How else could I carry out my experiments?” she said, smugly.

“My God! I don't believe it. When can I see it?” Douglas asked, excitedly.

Jennifer passed him a form. “First, sign this.”

Douglas looked at the piece of paper with a legal firm's heading at the top.

Nathan watched Dimmick's expression alter from one of excitement to seriousness. He too was surprised and wondered what the document said.

Dimmick looked up from the paper. "You want to swear me to secrecy?"

"What else did you expect?" she asked.

"It says here that if I mention this to anybody else, I will be liable up to a sum of one million pounds. Are you serious?" Dimmick said, tossing the form on the table.

"Are you afraid you cannot give your word and keep it?" Jennifer challenged. I am taking a big chance with you, Douglas, and I need your guarantee that you will honour this before I divulge anymore to you. So sign this or walk away hanging onto your idea that it's all a fucking magic spell."

Dimmick sat silently for a minute. Then he gingerly reached for the legal document.

Chapter 64

Free from prison, I am again at liberty to pursue the cause of Vincent's death. I didn't know for sure who the mystery person was who had come forward. I had my suspicions but that's all. If it was her, I silently blessed Annie Besant for her timely intervention.

It seemed to me that the key to this mystery had to lie with the Gachet children, especially Paul Jr. But to be sure, I needed to find Rene Secletaine. I figured that he would probably be out somewhere with his brother, creating some kind of mischief. The accepted account of Vincent's death, until now, had been that he walked into the countryside outside Auvers, leaned his easel against a haystack, and shot himself with a revolver. This version of events seemed plausible, given the artist's unstable mental and emotional state.

But Theo was totally convinced that somebody else was responsible for his brother's death. As it turns out, he was right on the money. But I still had to find out who the killer was, in the version of virtual reality in which I first entered France. The chances were that it was Still Gilles Thierry, but I had to be absolutely sure. At first I thought he was being irrational, an understandable state being as he was the grieving sibling. Now I know better, having witnessed Vincent being shot by somebody else, at least in one version of reality. In another parallel assimilation, he may well have shot himself. This was all very confusing and I needed a consecutive chain of events that involved Vincent, Rene and his brother and young Paul Gachet, the link between all three being Rene Secletaine, which is why I had to find him.

There were still some more questions to be answered before the case could be put to bed. Like, what happened to the gun? And why was Vincent's his painting equipment taken from the field? It looked suspiciously as though somebody had removed the evidence.

The boys were well known around Arles, mainly owing to their antisocial behaviour. But less was known about their presence in Auvers. And nobody seemed to know of their whereabouts, or they weren't saying. Going on the basis that there was a connection between Rene and Gilles Thierry, I asked people living nearby the railway shed where the railway maintenance was going on. Eventually an elderly woman, who's windows had been broken by the brothers, suggested they got their target practise down on the railway lines. Her information was correct. The boys were throwing stones at a railway signal, laughing loudly when they got a hit.

I climbed down the bank as quietly as I could. I knew they would run if I startled them. Or worse, throw stones at me. Yet I had to take a chance, to get their attention. Knowing their father to be a strict authoritarian, I chanced, "Does your father know that you do this?"

They turned and stared at me. Rene bristled at this. "What's this got to do with you?"

“I will tell him unless you tell me what I want to know.”

Recognising me, he scoffed, “He wouldn't believe the likes of you. He'll kick you out, like he did last time,”

Thank you Rene, I thought. At least the time line gelled with my memory of it. “You are prepared to chance that, are you?”

The younger brother, Gaston, vigorously shook his head.

Rene sneered, but did not move.

I had found his Achilles heel. “Rene, I know you and Gaston teased Vincent Van Gogh. I know you had a gun with you the day he was shot.”

Rene said, “We didn't shoot him. We were just having fun with him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Making out we were going to shoot him, scaring him.”

Gaston looked like he was about to cry.

“I know you didn't shoot the artist, but he was shot with your gun.”

Rene fronted up, like the tough guy he thought he was. Playing the brave big brother, he spat, “So, what do you want?”

“Who used the gun to shoot Vincent?”

Surprisingly, Rene responded, “You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

I saw who shot the painter but I am not sure which version of reality I'd been in at the time. I only needed Rene's confirmation. “Try me. What have you got to lose?”

He was weighing up his best options. Then he answered, “I don't know his name but a man came up to us and asked us what we were doing.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I said we were playing cowboys.”

“Then what happened?” I asked with anticipation.

“The man asked if the gun was real and wanted to see it.”

“This man, did he have a visible scar?”

Rene became more arrogant. “Yes, on his hand. Why?”

I ignored his question. “And you gave him the gun?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“The artist told me to.”

I did a double take. “Are you saying that Vincent told you to give your gun to the stranger?”

Rene shifted backwards. “I knew you wouldn't believe me.”

“I didn't say that. But why did Vincent say that, and why did you comply?”

Gaston spoke up. "Because the man was holding another gun, which he was pointing at us."

Then, it all made sense! Vincent had told the boys to hand the man the gun, for their own safety. "Then what happened?"

There was silence.

"What did the man do with your gun?"

"He handled the gun in a kerchief. Then he shot the artist with it," Gaston said.

It made sense that Gilles would use their gun. I asked, "What happened to your gun?"

Rene said, "He dropped it, after using it."

"And neither of you called for help," I said, shaking my head, showing disbelief at their absence of compassion.

"We thought he was dead. So we picked up the gun and ran away," Rene explained.

"You didn't think to check if he was alive?"

Rene shrugged, "Can we go now?"

They turned to leave. Then something occurred to me. I had one more question. I called out, "WHO'S GUN WAS IT?"

Gaston yelled back at me, "IT'S FATHER'S GUN."

I needed to look into this but it would have to wait. First I had to catch a train back to Auvers sur Oise.

During the journey certain aspects of the case played on my mind. Why would a lock keeper have a loaded pistol, for instance? I felt I was close to solving the mystery, but to what avail. True, it could help put my client's mind at ease but nothing was going to change because history couldn't be changed. Gilles Thierry would get away with the crime and history wouldn't be aware of this gross injustice.

Having arrived back in Auvers, I walked to Dr Gachet's house. There was a note stuck to the door, saying the doctor was still in his surgery. I waited there to speak with him. He had finished for the day. His last patient was leaving as I arrived. "Dr Gachet," I said, "I need you to help me tidy up a loose end about Vincent's shooting."

He sighed, "This had better be quick, Monsieur."

"Do you know a man called Gilles Thierry?"

"The name vaguely rings a bell. Let me think," he said, stroking his beard. At length he said, "Some time back, I don't remember when, I treated a man who had a very serious wound to his right hand. He claimed it was from an accident at the railway depot. But it looked like a knife wound to me."

"Was his name Thierry?"

The doctor went out into the waiting room and opened a draw in his filing cabinet. After a quick search through patients files, he smiled, "Ah," as he removed a card folder. "Here it is. His name is..." Then he hesitated and looked at me. "Why do you want to know?"

I had to give a plausible reason. "Because I have reason to believe he harms people for money."

His ginger eyebrows shot upward. "Why do you think such a thing?"

I didn't answer. I had another idea. "Doctor, did Vincent ever paint trains or pictures of the depot?"

He shook his head. "Not that I know of. As I said, he was very interested in the contrast between the rustic lifestyle and the new railway but..."

"...Why are you hesitating?"

"Your assertion that he is a hired killer is impossible for me to believe. He works on the railways, as a maintenance engineer."

I had what I needed. "Thank you for your time and help doctor."

He turned to me. "Monsieur please leave this case alone. No good can come of it and Vincent's brother has enough problems without you adding to them."

I looked him in his tired eyes. "Doctor Gachet I thought you might like to know what happened the day Vincent was shot."

He sighed, "It's been a long day. I was about to have an uplifting cognac, if you would like to join me."

We walked through the surgery, into his study. The walls were adorned with paintings, one of which was a sketch of Van Gogh on his deathbed. It was signed Paul van Ryssel.

Having poured two good measures of Cognac, he asked, "So what have you discovered, Monsieur Doyle?"

We touched tumblers and I inhaled the brandy. It gave me quite a jolt. "I have been speaking with the Secletain boys. They had quite a story to tell."

"Probably not a word of truth, knowing them."

I smiled, "Oh, I believe them doctor. You see they corroborated what I already knew, namely that a hired killer carried out the deed."

He sat back in his chair. "A hired killer! Nonsense."

"Nevertheless it's true. And you know him. He is one of your patients."

"Who is he then?" Paul asked, challengingly.

I smiled, "We have just been talking about him. It's Gilles Thierry, the man with the scar."

While his brain took this information in, I sipped my brandy.

He asked, "Who on earth would hire him to shoot poor old Vincent. And why?"

I leaned forward in my seat. "This is where it becomes interesting but I don't know how much to tell you."

"What do you mean Monsieur? Tell me all you know."

"Let me just say this to you. The person who hired Gilles Thierry to shoot Vincent did so as a matter of honour. At least that's how I see it."

"How can someone who hires a killer be honourable?"

"Perhaps by protecting somebody else's honour."

Just then, as though on cue, Marguerite entered the study. "Father, I..." The sentence remained unfinished. "Sorry father, I didn't know you had company."

Paul said, "This is Monsieur Doyle. Then, indicating his daughter. "This is my daughter Marguerite."

"Pleased to meet you Mademoiselle." I wondered if she remembered me.

She seemed to go pale, then excused herself.

I don't know if Paul sensed any uneasiness between his daughter and myself. I then knew I would not be informing him that his son had ordered the hit because his nineteen year old daughter and Van Gogh were having an ill fated, secret affair.

Paul Gachet offered more brandy.

I declined, "I really have to be going. Theo will want to know my findings."

"You haven't told me who allegedly hired Gilles Thierry?"

"No doctor, I haven't. I will tell my client and if he wishes to to tell you that is his affair."

The doctor stood up, his face reddening. "Why do you hold me in suspense?"

"Because there are some things better not spoken of."

I left him, puzzled and confused. But that was better than telling him the truth.

Chapter 65

I know I'm not exactly the brain of Britain, but I thought I was intelligent, at least for a cop. I thought I had a pretty good handle on life in general. Reality for me was just like reality for anybody else. Things were either in a solid state, a liquid state or a gaseous state. The material world was ordered in such a way it could always be relied upon. But since my quantime experiences began, I have learned that reality is a matter of perception.

Like Jennifer, my mind had long been stimulated by the concept of time travel. As a kid I was intrigued by, H G Wells, Jules Verne and of late, Dr Who and his Tardis. My mind is comfortable with that and with the idea of space travel, providing it was the normal kind. But space travel in the quantum sense threw my mind for a loop. Normally I would have discarded the notion of wave changing particle reality as being right off the wall, but since I had actually experienced it, I could no longer deny it. The simplest way I can describe it is like a jigsaw puzzle, in which the order of the pieces and the picture itself, changed, instantly. Of course this does not happen to jigsaw puzzles but at least it helped my embattled brain to grasp the concept of space assimilation.

Once more I found myself in Jennifer's laboratory. I was in good spirits as I alighted from the Quantime. Why shouldn't I be feeling a little bit smug? After all, I had just solved a criminal case in eighteen ninety France. I said, "Hello," so as not to frighten Jennifer, as she worked at her computer.

She looked up from her work, "Ossie, you're back."

We fell into an embrace. It felt great to feel her warmth against me. It's good to see you again." Then she asked, "Are you free?"

I knew what she meant. "I grinned, "Free as a bird."

She moved away from me. "So how did the parallel assimilation go?" she asked.

"I had to stay on the one reality track. Ergo, I had to materialise back in my cell. Luckily for me, a witness came forward and said they saw the whole thing."

"Who was it?"

“The police chief wouldn't say. But I have an idea who it might have been.”

“Who?”

“Annie Besant. She seemed to be looking out for me. But I guess I'll never know. Anyhow, the important thing is that I solved the case.”

She became wide eyed. “Wow! This calls for a celebration. I think there is some champers left in the fridge.”

“Okay. Meanwhile I'll phone Nathan.”

She looked at me with concern. “Oh Nathan. Yes, of course.”

“He was the one who sort of hired me. So I figure he will be interested.”

“Oh yes, I forgot.”

There seemed to be some tension in the lab. “Is there a problem between you and Nathan?” I asked, wondering if she didn't want him to be around us.

“What do you mean – problem?”

“There seems to be some uneasiness between you two.”

Becoming defensive, she responded, “That is none of your business. Nathan and I have known each other for many years. We've weathered many storms during that time.”

I guess she was right. Whatever was happening between her and Nathan had nothing to do with me. I had no exclusive rights to her, or for that matter, any rights at all. “I'll contact Nathan then,” I smiled.

As it happened Nathan couldn't come over to the farmhouse. He didn't give any reasons. So we caught up with him at the Wanderers Arms, around 7.30 pm. Jennifer and he were polite to each other, but there was definitely some uneasiness between the pair. As I tucked into a pub dinner and sipped a reasonable brew, both Nathan and Jennifer were gagging to hear what had happened in France.

Nathan asked, “So, did he shoot himself?”

I puffed out my chest, feeling proud. “Well, after questioning various suspects, I am now certain that the official story has many holes in it. Mind you I can see why they never looked beyond suicide as the cause of the artist's death. Van Gogh was mentally unstable and suffered mood swings. He had already mutilated his ear and a local petition had him sent to a mental asylum.”

“So what happened?” Nathan pressed.

“Gradually a number of threads came together. There was Vincent's close friendship with Dr Gachet, who's nineteen year old daughter modelled for Van Gogh. Then there were two teenage brothers, hooligans who teased Van Gogh and who provided the gun that caused the fatal wound.”

“So was it an accident - dangerous play, or murder,” Jennifer asked.

I had a bite of steak. “I thought it was dangerous play, at first. It seemed that the boys took things too far. But then another, more sinister element emerged. It aspired that somebody hired a killer to murder Vincent.”

Synchronised gasps emitted from Nathan and Jennifer.

Jennifer swallowed a mouthful of ale and said, “Who would have done such a thing and why?”

“That puzzled me for a while. Then I discovered that Dr Gachet's daughter was having a fling with Vincent.”

“Let me guess,” Jennifer said, “The doctor found out and hired the killer.”

“No, it wasn't Dr Gachet. In fact he implored me to tell him who hired the killer. But I did not do so?”

“Why not?” Nathan asked, downing his pint.

“For the same reason I am not telling you. I have to go back one more time, then I will reveal all.”

“Go back! What for?” Jennifer queried.

“I have to report to my client, Theo Van Gogh. And there is something else I must check on,” I winked.

As we tackled another round, our little group had lightened up and we seemed to be getting on well. Nathan said he had something to report.

I said, “Okay, what is it.”

“I think we can do it.”

My blank look probably matched Jennifer's. “Congratulations. Now tell me what you are talking about.”

“A virtual camera, using a quantised card,”

My face lit up. “So I can actually take photos of Theo Van Gogh!”

“Hold your horses,” Jennifer corrected, “It has not been constructed yet.”

Nathan also corrected me. “It's the camera, not you, that takes the photos.”

Smart arse, I thought. Addressing Jennifer, I said, “A quantum camera. Who would have thought it possible?”

She beamed, “Yes, it sounds quite exciting but I am reticent about going ahead with it.”

“Why?” I asked, “It sounds amazing.”

“Because Douglas Dimmick is going to have to install the camera software.”

I couldn't see a problem. “I thought that was sorted.”

Nathan answered, “He did sign the official secrets act document, Jen wrote.”

“He sounds like a genius if he can build a quantum camera,” I said, finishing my coffee.

Nathan said, “Jen is concerned about him coming to her home.”

“I turned to Jennifer. If his signed your OSA, what's the risk?”

Jennifer's look showed she was not amused.

In danger of digging myself in deeper, I said, “Surely you can see the huge benefits to be gained from this, Jennifer.”

She argued, “Just because he has signed a piece of paper doesn't mean he hasn't got loose lips”,

“Looks like I'm not going to get any photos of Theo then.” I sighed with resignation.

Chapter 66

I was told, at his Montmartre address, that Theo's health had deteriorated shortly after the tragic death of his beloved brother. He had been admitted to the Willem Arntz Hospital, a psychiatric establishment hospital, in Den Dolder, in his native Netherlands. His health had deteriorated rapidly since I had seen him in Auvers, a short time before. With all this quantime business It's difficult for me to relate to the normal passage of time.

Following a pit stop to have the Q' re-programmed, I found myself at the Willem Arntz Hospital. I was directed to where Theo Van Gogh was propped up in bed with pillows. He smiled weakly as I approached him.

“Do you have news for me, Monsieur Doyle?”

I sat down beside his bed. “I am sorry to see you in poor health.”

“I am told I am suffering from a progressive and general paralysis. Dementia paralytica, they call it. It's a syphilitic infection of the brain.”

I knew this. I remembered that he had died on twenty fifth, January, eighteen ninety one. The cause of death, listed as dementia paralytica, was caused by heredity, chronic disease, overwork and inconsolable sadness. But for now He stared at me with sunken eyes. His bony hand grasped my wrist. “Tell me please.”

I explained, “After following up leads and finding new clues it is my opinion that your brother did not shoot himself.”

His face broke out in a pained grin. “Thank you. Thank you. I knew it.”

He started coughing. I handed him a glass of water. “This matter will not get to court.”

As he looked at me, tears glistened in his eyes. “Why did he kill my brother?”

“He was paid to do so.”

“Paid! By whom?” he demanded, with laboured breathing.

I hesitated, then said, “Paul Gachet.”

“The doctor! Never! Why would he ...”

“... Not the father – the son.”

Theo stared at me. “But why would he want my Vincent killed?”

I sighed, Vincent spent a lot of time with Paul's sister, Marguerite.”

“Yes, of course. She was one of his models.”

“Theo, Vincent didn't only paint her.”

“What do you mean?” Then he stiffened, “You don't mean ...”

I nodded. “Her brother could not bear his father finding out - not after all the doctor had done for Vincent.”

Getting over the initial shock, Theo said, Vincent was misguided but loving. He would have loved her.” He was reflective for a moment. Then he said, “Does Dr Gachet know?”

“I very nearly told him but I saw no reason to cause him any more heartbreak.”

“Thank God. I hope he never finds out.”

“Indeed.”

Theo paused, then said, “Send me your bill and I will pay it immediately.”

French currency from 1890 was of little use to me. Instead I said, “You can pay me another way.”

“Oh!”

“I saw some artwork on Dr Gachet's wall. I've never heard of the artist.”

“Who was it?” the art dealer asked.

“Paul Van Ryssel.”

For the first time since my visit Theo laughed, weakly.

It was heart warming though. He told me why it was funny for him. Then I got the joke. Paul Van Ryssel was Dr Gachet's nom de paint. I also laughed.

the end.

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Chris Deggs was born in 1948 in Bury St. Edmunds, England. For many years he has lived in Australia. He is now happily retired and lives in the Tweed Valley in Northern New South Wales, Australia. He is a colleague of the Science-Art Cancer Research Institute of Australia where he is actively involved as a visual artist and author, He has written many contemporary works of fiction: mysteries, adventure, crime, ethics, conspiracy, global domination etc., as well as reference books for the betterment of the human condition. He has published a number of articles on the Academia Website reflecting this. Writing and painting are Chris' two main passions in life in which he is always looking for new ways to express himself.

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Here's a sample from my soon to be published story 'Marlowe – a quantime experience'

Modern day

It's funny how some things happen, how some seemingly insignificant event can lead to something huge. As it turned out, this was one of those times. It all started very innocently with me, Oswald Doyle, following up a left message on my phone. Someone called Jerrod Moors needed my professional help and wanted me to call by the Putney Arts Theatre, which had been set up in a former 19th-century church. I parked my Subaru in a place provided, near the church's main entrance. I entered the church and heard some singing coming from inside. Then I noticed a sign on an 'A' frame:

Please be quiet. Rehearsal in progress

At this point, I became aware just how difficult it is to walk silently on a stone floor, with my footfalls reverberating around the walls. The singing stopped, and a man with a shock of ginger hair surround a large bald patch looked in my direction. I figured he was the person who left me the message.

The thespian walked away from his players and approached the stranger in his midst. "You are?" he said, reaching the interloper.

"Oswald Doyle. I believe you left a message for me."

"Jerrod Moors," he smiled. "I need your help with something."

Well, that much was obvious, but I didn't say so. Some clients don't know how to deal with us PIs. That's private investigator for the uninformed. I noticed Jerrod was fiddling with the buttons of his cardigan, a sure sign he felt nervous. "So, how can I help you?"

"One of our Thespians is missing."

I wanted him to feel comfortable. "Is there somewhere we can sit down and have some tea?" Well, it's a homely sort of thing to do.

He turned to his crew. "Angela, can you organise some tea for us. There's a love."

I could only count eight members present, and I would need to ask them some questions. Turning to Mr Moors, I said, "I'll need to talk to your people. Make sure they stay."

"Oh, we haven't finished our rehearsal yet. Mind you it's going to be a waste of time unless we find Celine."

"Celine?" I queried, taking a seat in one of the pews.

“Celine Yeldon, our missing Thespian and our leading lady in our upcoming Buckingham Players production of 'The other Marlowe'.”

The tea duly arrived, and I asked him, “When did you last see Ms Yeldon?”

He pushed his spectacles up to the bridge of his nose. “Let me see. Yes, it was at our last rehearsal, a week ago.

“So you have weekly rehearsals?”

“Usually, yes.”

“Do you often make contact between rehearsals?”

“Only if necessary.”

“Did she say she wasn't coming today, Mr Moors?”

“No.”

“Then how come you left a message for me last night?”

“Well, you see there's something I haven't yet told you.”

“I'm all ears.”

“Celine is an excellent actress, who can be a prima donna at times. She has been known to throw hissy fits and storm off the stage at times, but she always returns to the fold.”

I still couldn't understand why he needed me. “So Celine could turn up at any time?”

He hesitated, “Yees. In theory.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like I said, I haven't contacted her. But it wasn't for want of trying. She left me a message. I sent her one back, but she never replied.”

I sighed heavily. “What exactly are you trying to tell me. Mr Moors?”

He took out his phone and tapped his audio recorder app. A clipped female voice said, “The Buckingham Players are going nowhere. I'm joining another group to help my career.”

“Well, there you have it. Ms Yeldon's told you what she's doing. So I don't see how I can help you.”

“We have a contract for another two plays. It's legally binding.”

“Okay, Mr Moors, I'll look into it. Have you any idea at all about where she could have gone.”

“None whatsoever I'm afraid. But we do need to find Celine very soon.”

“Why the urgency?”

“We have to open in 13 days.”

There's one thing worse than looking for missing people, and that's looking for missing individuals who aren't missing. Ms Yeldon fell in this category. If she was sabotaging Jerrod's play, staying out of his way was probably a good option. Still, he was paying me to find her so I'd better earn my dough. My phone told me it was getting on for noon, and I had another pressing engagement, a lunch date with Jennifer Smethurst. She's the genius who invented the Quantime, often referred to as simply the 'Q'. I hadn't seen her for a few months since the French adventure. Actually 'French experience' doesn't cut it. But words can't explain it and as the months have rolled by it all seems a

bit unreal, or is that surreal? The thing is she wants to see about something, and I want to see her. So that works out well

By the time I arrived at St James' Restaurant, I was twenty minutes late. I picked Jennifer out from the other diners. She was the one wearing a scowl. I put on a brave face. "Hi Jen, it's been a while."

"Yes, twenty-one minutes longer than it needed to be." she said, with sharpened claws and a tongue to match.

"I'm sorry Jen. Roadworks on the way here were something shocking."

"Well, you'd better sit down and get me some wine."

I clicked my fingers at a passing waitress and got no response. "Excuse me. Miss," I said.

"Someone will be with you shortly," she snapped, laden with empty dishes.

"So how are you?" Jennifer asked, a semblance of a smile playing on her lips.

I picked up a menu, which was excellent. Spoiled for choices I chose Steak Dianne. "I'm doing okay. So what did you want to see me about?"

"I want you to check on somebody for me."

I raised an eyebrow, "Oh, who are you checking on?"

"Declan Merrick."

"Who's he, Jen?"

"Someone who wants to invest in the 'QSA'."

I looked at her. "How did Declan Merrick find out about your invention it?"

She shrugged. "Declan just rang me out of the blue. We had lunch, and he said he was interested. He seems genuine but ..."

"...How much have you told him?"

"He knows it's about QSA, (Quantum Space Assimilation), a new science and he wants to get on board on the ground floor."

"What sort of investment is involved."

"Gerard is dealing with that," she said, sternly.

I acted hurt. "Oh, I get it. You don't want to tell me."

"It hasn't been decided yet. But it could run into a number followed by lots of noughts."

I sighed, "Okay, Jen, send me the details."

Lunch was well presented and with excellent cooking. Wine flowed and the dessert, chocolate cheesecake was the best. Afterwards, I said, "It's good to see you again, Jen."

She smiled, her face lighting up. "You too, Ossie."

My mind went back to the bad times we'd had together. I wondered if we could recapture what we had. But she hadn't invited me back to her place, so I didn't push it. I got up to leave and said, "I've missed you, Jen."

"When you have your report ready come round for dinner. Then Jennifer said, "I've missed you

too.”

My mind screamed YES!

The other Marlowe, I discovered, was a new play based on a book by Wilber Gleason Zeigler. I don't know why it interested me, as I'd never before taken any particular interest in the subject. But it was central to the missing Thespian case, particularly when Jerrod Moors was concerned. I phoned Ms Yeldon's number. Somebody had disconnected it. She must have hated Jerrod Moors for her to change her contact details. If and when I caught up with her I'd try to find out what he'd done to piss her off. But first I had to find her. I figured she'd had an agent, but that wasn't much help. The phone book listed hundreds of them. Next, I checked to see if she had a facebook page.

She did and had 127 friends listed. But how many were close enough to her for her to confide in. Most Facebook friends tend to be people we haven't met on the Outernet. When you have to rely on the social media to locate, someone things are getting bad. For the next half hour, I trolled through a few friend profiles and one turned out to be an actors agent. It was a long shot, but it was all I had. I phoned a contact number and got an appointment. There was only one thing. I had to make out I was an actor.

I found myself in Golden Square, just east of Regent Street and north of Piccadilly Circus. I had to park four blocks away, near the notorious Broad Street pump, a common source of cholera in the 1850's. I'm here because Adrian Jenkinson had his office three floors up above shops in Golden Square. A sign on his door read:

A J means talent. I entered a small room with pictures of celebrities decorating the walls. Judy, Adrian's secretary, a fiftyish bottle blonde, all perfume and pedicure, welcomed me and handed me a form.

“What's this for, I asked.”

She looked at me as though I had just stepped out of a saucer from Mars. “For you to fill in, Mr Doyle. What needs some CV details from you.

I stared at the form, then at her. “What all of it?”

“The more info you give us, the better your prospect of finding work.”

It was time to baffle her with bullshit. “I never got treated like some amateur, in the states.”

The puzzled look on her face said she couldn't figure me out. I was either a raw beginner with no acting experience or a professional with an attitude. Tutting, she said, “Just fill in your contact details.”

I didn't. I just sat and waited. Ten minutes later Adrian Jenkinson emerged from his office. He was a large, loud man with a suit to match,

The agent looked at the form I hadn't filled in. He said, “Dear me, there's nothing here about your acting career.”

“Yes, well, I'd have to get the details from my New York agency.”

“Oh! Which agency would that be?”

Things were getting tricky. I noticed a couple of magazines on Adrian's desk: Spotlight and Stardome. The old Doyle brain notched into gear. “Starlight.”

“Can't say I've heard of them.”

“They're very new.” I stared at the effusive Adrian. “But I haven't come her about acting jobs. I'm

here about an actor.”

He leant back and folded his massive arms. “What are you talking about?”

“It's more a case of who I'm talking about. A Celine Yeldon to be precise.”

He stared at me, not quite knowing how to proceed.

I added, “There could be a role for her in New York. I phoned her number, but it's disconnected. I have spoken with Jerrod Moors, but he has no idea of her whereabouts.”

“And what makes you think I would know this person?”

I could hardly say you're Facebook friends. “I'm desperate to find her, and I had to start somewhere.”

He thought it over. “What's this play you're talking about?”

“Zeigler's 'The other Marlowe'. I said quickly.

He checked his client details on his computer. Then he looked up from the screen. “That's Jerrod's play, and she's playing a leading role.”

“That's why they want her in the Big Apple.”

“And you say she's missing.”

“Jerrod does. And his quite concerned.”

“Yes, I imagine he is.” Then he said If she gets this role I want my fifteen percent.”

I grinned, “So you are her agent.”

“Yes, but I don't have a new number for her.”

“How about an address?”

He checked through her profile details. “Ah, here we are. Jefferson House, 11 Basil St, Knightsbridge.”

I stored this info in my navigator app and left the somewhat bemused Adrian to ponder what had just happened.

I figured Ms Yeldon could wait to later in the day. It was time to find out about Mr Declan Merrick. The sooner I dug up his shit, the sooner I got to hang out with the delectable Jen. Now there's an incentive to get me motivated.

It turned out that Declan Merrick founded Boogle, now an American multinational technology company specialising in related services and products. These include online advertising technologies, search, cloud storage and associated software.

I could certainly see why someone like that would want a part of the 'Q'.

Declan Merrick embarked on Boogle as a PhD Student at Stanford University. He owns around 28 percent of its shares. He incorporated Boogle as a privately held company on September 8, 1999. It initially became a public entity on July 18, 2003. Bugle's mission statement has always been 'to organise global info data to make it universally accessible'.

So Declan was a very wealthy boy. Now I had to dig a little deeper. Hoover's website gave me more juice on this guy.

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(650) 263-0000

<http://www.bugle.com/intl/en/about/index.html>

Boogle Inc. Rankings

#45 in FORTUNE 500 (June 2015)

Dow Jones Global Titans

#6 in FT Global 500 (June 2015)

#42 in FORTUNE 1000 (June 2015)

The company profile lists Boogle as a leading Internet search engine. Taking its name from 'Bugle' the musical instrument that acts as a clarion wake-up call. Boogle offers targeted search results from billions of Web pages. Results, based on a proprietary algorithm; its technology for ranking Web pages, came from PageRank. The firm generates revenue through ad sales. Advertisers deliver relevant ads targeted to search queries or Web content. The Boogle Network is a network of third-party customers that use Boogle's ad programs to provide relevant ads to their sites.

Next, I downloaded the company report, industry and technology reports. Jen could go over them at her leisure. I must admit I didn't like the idea of such a business heavyweight getting a large slice of the 'Q' I've gotten attached to it since my jaunt into 19th Century France. To tell you the truth I wouldn't mind not travelling anywhere and arriving somewhere different, again.

Jefferson House, one of those huge red-brick town houses converted into units, sported massive bay windows and wrought iron fencing. There was a bell option for each unit. I learned they are called studios; Units are a bit standard for this end of town. Luckily one of them, studio 7 had Yeldon written on it. The word was somewhat faded but just legible enough for me to chance it. Right, so what was I going to say. As I pressed the button, it had just begun to rain, and my car was parked 300 or so metres away, A refined English voice responded to the bell "Yes, what do you want?"

"Are you Ms Yeldon?"

"One of them. Why do you want to know?"

"Look, can I come up so I can speak with you?"

"What do you want to speak about?"

Jesus, this was getting nowhere. So I went for the Big Apple ploy. "I represent the Starlight talent agency in New York. We want to speak with Celine Yeldon about a part."

There was a pause, then, "Very well, come on up."

The main door buzzed, then opened.

A very well turned out, perfectly permed sixty-ish matronly type opened the door but stood squarely in the portal, backed up by her toy Chihuahua, which stared at me threateningly from the crook of her arm. "Hello, I'm Fortence Yeldon. Celine is my younger sister."

"Oh, do you know where she is?"

"I'm afraid not, young man. You ought to try the ghastly little queen, Moors. He seems to keep tabs on her."

"Not this time. Gerard's looking for her as well."

“Oh, so he's the one getting you to track her down.”

Sensing a trap, I stuck to the lie. “I have to let Starlight know if she's interested, today. So you can understand my urgency.” I could see that she was thinking about it by the way her eyes turned heavenward, as though she weighed up some huge decision.

“Eventually, she said, “Personally I believe that this Thespian Lark takes the time she could use more productively. The last I heard is that she was staying with our brother. From time to time Celine suffers from terrible migraines and has to have peace and quiet. When she gets an attack, she goes off to our brother, who has a delightful house in the country.”

“What's his phone number?”

That wouldn't be much use. Our brother spends a lot of time in the city and Celine won't answer the phone.”

“And your brother's contact details?”

“Oh, he's a very private man. I'll ring him and ask for you ...”

“... Great! Can you do it now?”

“That wouldn't do any good. Our sibling's a barrister and never uses the phone for private calls until after he finishes work. Leave your number and I'll let you know what he says.”

So that was as far as I was going to get till later. I duly handed Fortense one of my cards.

She stared at me as if I had two heads. “It says you're a private detective. I thought you said ...”

Anticipating this reaction, I lied, “Starlight has employed me to find her.” That seemed to satisfy her, so I left Jefferson House with my dishonour intact.

It had been months since I'd been out to Jen's farmhouse in Bushey. It was close to 7 pm the time she was expecting me. I was clutching the single stem of the red rose to my chest when she opened the door.

Smiling sweetly Jen teased, “Do you always bring flowers to business meetings?”

“Seeing the sexy dress, showing a generous amount of cleavage, she was almost wearing, I retorted, “Do you always wear clothes like that to business meetings?”

“Touche. You'd better bring it in then. Pity it isn't Matteus Rose, though.”

Jen had made some of her delicious vegetable soup, which we shared with a bottle of Cabonnyay.

“So how's it going with the 'Q' project?”

“Where's the report on Declan Merrick?”

I handed her the memory stick. “This guy is mega rich and a cyberspace guru with an enormous amount of clout. I can see why he would want in on the 'Q' but maybe not for the purest of reasons.”

She stared at Ossie. “How often do we bump into billionaires. Look this guy is my best chance of getting the 'QSA' out there. And I think it's time.”

“He's the sort of guy who'll probably want a go in it.”

“So, what's wrong with that?”

She took a sip of wine and reached over to touch Ossie's hand. “You're the bravest person I know. You pioneered the 'QSA'. You were the first man in quantum space, and I shall always admire you

for having faith in me and my technology. But it's time for the second phase and, As long as Declan his a clean legal bill of health I'm inclined to take him up on his offer.”

I looked at this beautiful lady. Hey, thank you for giving me the opportunity of a lifetime. You know, Jen. “I've never felt so alive as when I was back in France investigating Vincent's death. I yearn for that excitement, that risk, that adrenalin rush, again.”

Jennifer, knowing she couldn't promise him that experience again, changed the subject. “So what sleuthing have you been up to?”

I finished my wine. My vanishing actress case is probably the most challenging.”

“I'm intrigued. Tell me about it?”

She listened while I made the tale as interesting as I could. Then she said, “Marlowe was a bit of a bad boy, wasn't he.”

“A man of many talents, by all accounts,” I said while sidling up to her on her couch. “Apart from being a playwright genius, he was allegedly also a government spy.”

Nestling up to Ossie, she said, “Didn't he have a reputation for heavy drinking and womanising?”

Sliding me arm around her shoulder, I responded, “A contemporary author, Francis Meres, has it that Marlowe was' stabbed to death by a bawdy serving-man, a rival of his in his erotic love' as punishment for his 'Epicurism and atheism.”

“Is that what happened?” she asked, snuggling into Ossie.

“It's listed as such in the Dictionary of National Biography and is still often stated as fact today.”

“Do you believe it happened that way,”

Then the proverbial light bulb flashed above my head. “Wouldn't it be great If I could witness it as a Quantime experience?”

Jennifer backed away, saying, “No, I don't think it's a good idea. Besides, we'd need the quantum camera up and running to record the moment.”

She was right about that. Just imagine getting a photo of Marlowe fighting. “So how is the Qcam project going, Jen?”

“Nathan has to keep dragging that idiot genius back from the brink.”

“I thought Dimmock was enthusiastic about have a share in the 'Q'.”

“Yes, he has his good days, but he keeps falling into the abyss. Mind you he'll have to come good soon. The Qcam is part of the Declan deal.”

“So why isn't he, with all his techno resources, designing his own?”

“He thinks I already have one.”

“Shit! I see what you mean.”

Jen was rushing around trying to make everything perfect. I made her a cup of chamomile tea. “Relax Jen; It's not the Queen coming to dinner.”

Jennifer took the herbal tea from Ossie. “He's more important than the queen. She's not about to invest big bucks in the QSA.”

I laughed, “Exactly. Declan's not coming here to check out your suitability for a housemaid position.”

Jennifer sipped her tea. Then our ears pricked as we heard the throaty roar of a car coming up the drive.

Jen opened the front door as Declan untangled his long legs as he climbed out of a beautifully restored E-Type Jag.

“At least he doesn't have a chauffeur,” I quipped. Jennifer shot me a look that said, 'no American jokes'. I appraised him as gave Jen a hug. He was a bit younger and a helluva lot richer than me. His visage and shock of black slightly curly hair put me in the mind of a young Elliot Gould.

I guess he wasn't a bad bloke, as Yanks go, and he did show a willingness to learn. Jennifer wanted me on hand to explain what the weird 'QA' experience felt like for me. She was getting on like a house on fire with him when it came to the hi-tech stuff. But only I could convey the weirdness and wonderfulness of actual quantum travelling. Sorry, quantum space assimilation. As Jennifer went to pains to point out, there is no actual travelling involved, in the real sense of the word. It's more a case of 'space exchange' a concept not even known to quantum science.

As we sat rambling on about stuff going on the world, Declan announced, “Jennifer, I want to have a go in your time machine.”

Neither of us was particularly surprised at this, and now the Jumbo had trumpeted we could no longer ignore its presence in the room. Jennifer said, “Anywhere in particular?”

I piped up. “What about Elizabethan England?”

“Why?” They both chorused.

“To find out about Marlowe.”

“What, Christopher Marlowe, the playwright?” Declan asked.

“Well, there's a lot of intriguing mystery in his life,” I reasoned.

Declan said, “Hey man, that's an excellent idea. Let's go for it.”

“Hang on a moment,” Jennifer intercepted, “It's not as easy as all that. A lot of preparation is involved. I have to programme as many relevant data as I can into the 'Q' so you can blend into Elizabethan society.”

I explained, “When in Nineteenth-Century France I was amazed at many things that automatically happened after stepping out of the 'Q', including my appropriate dress for the time and the fact I could instantly speak Fluent French, including dialect.”

Declan rubbed his jaw. “I see what you mean, Jennifer. Guess I was getting a bit ahead of myself.”

“I think we all are,” she replied. “Now, if that's what you want to experience I'll start on the programming.”

“Hey, I'd be real honoured to watch you do that,” Declan said.

She shook her head. “That's not going to work. I have to do it alone. But I can show you the software I designed to deal with data collection.”

“That would be great.”

Jennifer rose from her seat. “Okay, while I get it set up ask Ossie about his quantime experiences.”

I made coffee while Declan jotted down some questions to ask. As we sipped our brew, feeling like the expert I wasn't, I said, "So hit me with it."

The American grinned, "You were the first guy to experience the 'Q machine', right?"

"I am the only person to have done it," I proudly boasted.

"So what did you feel when you first stepped in that thing?"

"It's difficult to describe. I suppose I was too overwhelmed to consider anything I could define. Being in the lap of the gods comes to mind. It's like surrendering to an unknown force."

Declan nodded. "Jen talked about you trusting her and her technology. Were you conscious of it when you entered the machine?"

I sipped my coffee, partly to play for time. "To be honest, I was shit scared and couldn't make up my mind about doing it. But there was another guy who was ready to take my place. I guess the thought of missing out on the adventure of a lifetime was the primary motivator, not trust."

"Yeah, I understand the power of competing. So are you saying you didn't trust Jennifer?"

"It's not that. It's just that the concept of trust brings with it a sense of insecurity and that's something I didn't want to cope with."

"You said you were overwhelmed, and that overrode any other feelings you had deep down."

"As soon as I stepped into Jen's Pumpkin, as we affectionately called it, and there were no seatbelts, no controls, not even an engine, I guess my brain was in 'can not compute' mode. The best way I can explain it is there was a particular mind numbing about it. In some way, such an odd experience seemed to override the reptilian fight or flight instinct."

"So what you're saying is that the strange things you experienced overrode your survival instinct, so it didn't become an issue."

"It's not a full explanation, but it'll have to do for now."

Declan got up. "Thanks, Ossie. I'll just go and check to see if Jennifer is ready for me."

Declan said, "Knock, knock," before he entered Jennifer's domain.

"Oh, come on in."

He took a seat. Getting the scientist's attention, he said, "So how does 'Q' travel work?"

Starting at Quantum Biology kindergarten level, she began. "Let's start with the concept of the wave function. To completely describe the state of a physical system the shape of the wave function encodes the probabilities for the outcomes of any measurements an observer might perform. But wave function belongs to nature, as an objective description of an objective reality."

Declan, already struggling in the deep end, said, "So how does that relate to quantum travel?"

She smiled, "Okay, first off I programme data into the 'QSA' which it turns into a wave that contains all that information in a photonic bank of energy. This information energy synchronises with the subject's consciousness, which describes the state of the physical system in, say, the Elizabethan world."

Responding honestly, he said, "I get it. The info data, in a waveform, becomes the subject's conscious experience."

Impressed, she continued, "The shape of this wave function encodes all the probabilities for the

outcomes of any measurements an observer might perform on it. It also overrides our prejudices, likes and dislikes, etc. But, once you're out of the 'QSA', it heightens your sense of fight or flight.”

“That's interesting because Ossie was just saying how the experience of the 'Q' nullified signals from the reptilian brain.”

“That would only be the initial 'no' response. Declan, the human mind is amazing in that it can adapt to difficult situations very quickly. Now that Ossie has a few 'QSA' experiences under his belt he can approach quantum assimilation with confidence.”

Declan, amazed by this brilliant woman's grasp of quantum reality, said, “So, Jennifer, how do you gather all the info you need for a particular quantum experience. I mean how do you know you have all bases covered?”

She smiled knowingly at him. “I don't gather any particular data. If anything I 'ungather' it.”

“Ungather it!” he uttered, thrown by her statement.

She explained, “The thing about 'quantum reality' is that everything in the universe exists simultaneously. The general idea with quantum mechanics is that a standing wave represents 'potential', in that, in its quantum state, it can collapse into the form of particle reality, as an act of consciousness. What the CPU of the 'QSA' does is change that potential into the reality of a chosen target, e.g. the Elizabethan era.”

“Wow! That's amazing.”

She looked at him. “No more amazing than your Boogle search engine. Doesn't it work in the same way?”

“What do you mean?”

“The Internet is nothing more than stored digital data. As long as the data exists, we can search for anything. For that to be the case, every bit and byte of info have to exist simultaneously. What the Enquirer has to do is de-clutter the Internet to find that which they seek.”

Declan laughed, “I've never heard it put quite that way before.”

“However, The QSA doesn't work that way.”

“Oh!” he responded, eyes widening.

“That was acceptable quantum thinking when I was at Uni. But none of my experiments in 'space travel', as a saw it be, worked. Then, one day, I was watching a documentary that went some way to explaining the Australian Aboriginal concept of 'walkabout' The narrator said that the nomadic tribes followed invisible magnetic routes they call 'song lines'. A singer in the group sang the journey into existence as they walked the deserts and bushland.”

“How did that help you in your experiments, Jen?”

“I came to realise something profound about this. I realised that for the 'Q' to function in real time it had actually to manifest that reality by, not so much de cluttering the universe of infinite possibility, but by making the target reality the only one that existed. In other words, the reality of, say the Elizabethan age only exists when entangled with the 'QSA' experience and human consciousness.”

“My god, Jen, That breakthrough has to be worthy of a Nobel Prize.”

She grinned, “I don't know about that, but it was certainly worthy of getting me fired from my lecturer's job at Uni.”

