

Chapter One - Weird Things

He always hated train journeys at night. By day they could be quite inspiring because he could stare out at the passing scenery. The sideways scrolling backdrop of houses, factories and fields fired his imagination like mental rocket fuel. Every aspect of human life was being played out just beyond the glass and he feasted on the possibilities. He only had to catch a glimpse of someone at a window to begin constructing a life for them: a family, a past, a secret. He created all this in his mind for just long enough for the next distraction to arrive.

That was the thing with Alex Preston. His imagination was what kept him going in a world of mental static and white noise. Half his life was spent drifting off into a place of his own. It could happen anywhere: on his way home from work, alone with his wife or even in the middle of a conversation. A switch would flick inside his head and he would begin spiralling away from everything around him, conjuring up scenarios in which his life was whatever he wanted it to be. He could be a hero or a victim, a legend or a history maker. There were more things that Alex had done in his imagination than were possible in a hundred lifetimes.

But at that moment the only thing he could see was his own reflection against the pitch black of an October night. That did nothing to distract him from the cold and discomfort of his journey. Whatever the time of year, railway carriages always seemed to him to be colder and noisier after dark. This particular train rocked back and forth as it wound its way down the track. The clatter from the wheels seemed so much louder than it had twelve hours ago that it drove itself into his head. There was no escape from the din.

He glanced at his watch and wished he had not stayed so late. He could have been at home kissing the baby goodnight instead of being squeezed into a broken, stained seat on a

godforsaken train. He closed his eyes and tried to doze away the journey. Alex had learned from years of commuting that it was possible to sleep on public transport by locking his neck and balancing himself in his seat. There was a film he had seen as a child about a medieval king called El Cid. The man had died on the eve of a huge battle and his generals knew that this could prove disastrous for morale. So they had nailed him to his saddle and sent him onto into the field of battle on his horse, bolt upright, to lead his men to victory. Alex had adapted this technique to allow him to nod off on the late train without flopping back against the window like a drooling fool. He just had to position himself properly then...

“Is this taken?”

He jerked upright at the sound of the voice. The carriage was half empty but still a middle aged man was pointing expectantly at the vacant seat beside him. “Oh. Err. Yeah,” Alex mumbled, hoping to put the man off. But the stranger simply smiled and sat down. He looked in his fifties and was wearing a dark pin striped suit and was carrying a raincoat folded in the crook of one arm. After settling himself into the seat and placing the coat over his lap he pulled a newspaper from a leather holdall. He started reading the front page as Alex shifted towards the window and closed his eyes again.

He began to conjure up another daydream. On his way to the station that evening he had seen a newspaper headline about a soldier being decorated for bravery. He could imagine himself in that position: a tough yet sensitive fighting man who is sent to war in a far off land. He comes under attack and, despite overwhelming odds, drives the enemy away then risks his own life to save his comrades from a burning vehicle. Alex knew that he would run away screaming if he ever had to go to war but he liked the idea of being a hero. Besides which, there was nothing he could actually do to stop his imagination from running amok. It happened

mostly of its own accord and was getting worse as he grew older. In the past, dreams had been excusable but a responsible adult life had its limits.

“It’s been a hell of a day hasn’t it?”

Alex’s mental meanderings were cut short and he opened his eyes. “Sorry?” He sounded annoyed.

“The weather. I got soaked twice this afternoon. They say it’ll last all week.”

Alex looked at the man’s neatly folded raincoat. It was bone dry. “I don’t mind a bit of rain,” he said and he closed his eyes again. The picture in his mind now was of him being attacked on the last train home by a nutty man with a dry raincoat. He imagined Sarah weeping and the children being brought in to kiss him as he lay in a coma. He wondered which celebrity his family might ask to record a message of encouragement to be played at his bedside. The nurses on the ward would keep a solemn watch over him and everyone who had ever been bad to him would feel...

“Travelling at night is never fun is it?”

“Oh for...” Alex opened his eyes for the third time and turned to his unwanted companion. He was relieved to see that the old man did not appear to be a threat. There was a kind of softness to his face and creases around his mouth that looked like he spent a lot of time smiling. But he was still being annoying. “You don’t like it?” Alex asked.

“Oh I don’t mind,” the man said, “I meant you.”

At that moment the train began to make a loud grinding sound, like nails being dragged slowly down a blackboard. It grew louder and louder until it filled the carriage like a scream. The wail of metal on metal made other passengers raise their heads above the line of seats like frightened animals. At the other end of the carriage a woman holding a baby looked back

towards Alex with tears in her eyes. The train lurched to the side, as if it was about to flip over, then righted itself. The metallic screeching stopped. The disturbance seemed to have passed but then there was a tremendous bang and all the seats juddered. Then a deep roaring sound started from the front of the train and everything around Alex began moving in slow motion. There was an intense vibration from the floor and the lights flickered as the roaring grew louder. Alex looked over the top of the seat in front and saw the fear on the faces of an elderly couple. The young mother was holding her baby and crying even more loudly than the child. And then he saw it: tearing its way towards them through the other carriages and devouring everything in its path with a hellish bellow.

Another train.

“Crap.” He sank back into his seat.

“Just do the right thing when the time comes.” The man barely whispered, yet the words carried over the insane racket. In the final moment he laid his hand on Alex’s and leaned in close. Alex was paralysed by the enormous dark shape that was about to swallow them up but then he felt the coolness of the stranger’s palm and his fear left him. He breathed out slowly as a huge shard of metal twisted through the air and flew at him down the length of the carriage. The lights went out.

“It’s too bloody dark.”

The metal felt cold between Alex’s fingers and his grip was so weak that he struggled not to drop it. He gritted his teeth and tried again.

“Bullseye.”

The key slid into the lock and with a quick twist the door sprung open. Then he was in the hallway fumbling for the light switch. The house was in darkness and the sounds of his sleeping family drifted from the landing. Alex Preston was home.

“Biscuit.”

Alex opened one eye and closed it again.

“Biscuit.”

He felt a chubby finger poking him as the little boy grew more insistent. Matthew was standing by the side of the bed trying to wake his Daddy up. A quick look at the clock on the bedside table and Alex realised it was pointless trying to resist his son’s pestering. He slid out from under the covers and stumbled downstairs to make Sarah her morning tea. When he returned to the bedroom, Matthew and Katie were both curled up with their mother, who was watching the news.

“Have you seen this?” she said, pointing at the screen. There were images of firemen sifting through a huge pile of wreckage, an unrecognisable mass of dark metal that looked like it had been through a blender. There were bright red patches dotted around the heap of blackened steel that Alex realised were blankets covering bodies. “That must have been the train after yours. Those people...”

Alex sipped his tea and said nothing. He had a head full of confusing thoughts. The pictures on the television evoked vague memories of a train journey through the dark, screaming metal and a sense of terror. But the news report was about a crash with no survivors. He looked at his hands for any cuts or scratches; any sign that he might have been involved. They were unblemished. He was convinced that this was just one of his daydreams. Then he heard the

reporter begin the roll call of the dead. A mother and her young child were among the victims, along with an older couple who had been celebrating their wedding anniversary. “Oh my God that’s awful,” said Sarah, but Alex was not listening. He felt unsteady and his heart began to beat frantically, not out of sorrow for the deaths of strangers but because his body was buzzing with the news that he was still alive.

As he buttoned his shirt he considered telling his wife what he was thinking, but he could not imagine hearing the words, “Darling I think was on that train with all those people who died but I survived without a scratch and I can’t remember how I got home.” They sounded absurd enough in his head. Miracles did not happen, not to him anyway. It was like he had the ghost of a memory about trains and strangers. Then the moment passed as a mental numbness swept over him like morphine pouring through his veins. There were no more thoughts of miraculous survival, only of getting dressed and going to work. After grabbing a mouthful of coffee he snatched up his keys and left the house. The railway line was still closed so he had no choice but to drive. He pulled out of the end of the road and slid through the suburbs.

On the main road leading down towards the office there was a bridge across the carriageway. It was made of grey concrete, with ominous brown stains leaking through its stony skin. As Alex’s car approached through the nose to tail traffic, he noticed some graffiti scrawled across the side. He wondered how anyone managed to write anything upside down on a bridge. “B... e... r...” He slowed the car down to study the white letters. “Be ready.”

“Ready for what?” he wondered. It was bound to be something religious; these things usually were. “Nutters,” he muttered as he accelerated away. It was then that he glanced up at his rear view mirror and saw the graffiti on the other side of the bridge, written backwards like the words on an ambulance.

“Alex. Do the right thing.”

He spent the first hour at the office phoning his insurance company, explaining his broken front bumper and dented bonnet. This was done while he should have been working. Alex had mastered the art of making personal calls with the facial expression of someone dealing with vital business matters. It was the skiver’s version of the poker face; straight and serious with a steely gaze. He used it now as he explained to the woman in the call centre how he had driven up the back of a delivery lorry on his way in to work. He left out of the detail about seeing a bizarre message on the side of a bridge. He doubted that it would help his claim.

As the call wound up he opened his email and saw a stack of messages demanding his attention. This was not what he wanted to be doing. He would much rather be sitting on a beach, somewhere remote, watching the wind from the sea whipping over the grass topped dunes of white sand. He would have his coat pulled up around his chin and Sarah and the kids would be there with him, feeling relaxed and happy. He could hear the children’s laughter as they ran over the sand. His head would be clear of the noise and nonsense and he would be able to enjoy life for what it was.

But to get to that beach he would have to quit first. He could imagine walking into Peter Jones’ office and telling him where to stick his stupid job. Just the thought of it was enough to get his pulse racing. He could see it now: the man’s drooping jaw and look of shock as Alex announced his departure. It would be only at this point that the idiot Jones would realise how it was Alex who kept the place running. He would really feel it once he had gone and things started to fall apart. But by then...

“Heard you smacked your car up mate.”

Alex looked up from an invisible point in space, just above his coffee cup, to see Andrew Marshall grinning down at him. It was to Marshall's credit that Alex only resented him half as much as he did Jones. But at least his boss had the excuse of being a manager who made life hell for others; Marshall was just plain annoying. Nothing ever bothered him. He never admitted to any kind of weakness or failing and it was clear that he had absolutely no doubt about his own abilities. He would also refer to his male colleagues as "mate" at every opportunity and was forever shaking hands with them, in the most insincere way possible.

"Yeah, just a knock. I don't even drive in normally." Alex's voice trailed away. The mental painkiller had begun to wear off and he started to shiver but Marshall did not notice. He had already switched his attention to the stack of papers he was cradling.

"Oh, why's that then?" he asked distantly.

It was a mark of how little Marshall knew about his colleagues that Alex had to explain that he usually commuted by train, as he lived so far out of town. "There was a crash on the line last night. It's still shut so I had to drive in."

Marshall snorted. "That was unlucky." There was something ugly about the way he said it. He went on, "Are you coming to Phil's leaving do tonight?"

Alex grimaced. He had forgotten all about the party that evening, in honour of a colleague who was moving abroad. Faced with a drive home he would not be able to drink so it hardly seemed worth it. It was not even being held anywhere decent; just beers in the office followed by more at the pub down the road. But he lacked the will to argue and agreed to stay for one drink. That was enough to send Marshall away and allow Alex to get on with some work. For the rest of the day he put all thoughts of trains, graffiti and car accidents out of his mind. At five o'clock Peter Jones appeared from his office pushing a trolley loaded with bottles

and plastic cups. Though most of Alex's colleagues shared his sentiments about their boss, they all crowded around to get some free alcohol and toast their friend who was leaving.

Alex sat on the edge of his desk and sipped orange juice while the rest of the office attacked the pile of beers with gusto. He just wanted to be at home. At least if he had been drinking he would not have felt guilty at leaving Sarah alone with the kids for the second night in a row. His mind began to wander away from the banter and gossip of his inebriated colleagues and off into his own world yet again. This time it was not a day dream but one of his personal petty rants.

There were many things that got on Alex's nerves and every day he seemed to find a new one to add to the list. Now it was people who did not have kids and could drink themselves dumb without worrying about getting home before a toddler's bed time. Then there were the people who were married or in long term relationships but who spent so much time away from their partners that they may as well be single. Alex's office was full of those. They were the ones who went on every business trip going, would spend all weekend playing golf or football and see their partners at some point in between. And yet they were the same people who would go on pretentious foreign holidays as the perfect loving couple. When he walked into their houses he would see them grinning down from photos on the wall: Mr and Mrs Perfect standing by a waterfall in Thailand.

"You look miserable Alex. Had some bad news?" Marshall's sweaty, drunken form was swaying about in front of him. He had a beer bottle in each hand and was bobbing and weaving around with a ridiculous grin on his flushed face. Alex resisted the temptation to give him a kick just to see if he would bounce back up again.

"No, just planning on heading home. I'm driving."

Marshall steadied himself against the edge of the desk. “So why did you drive in to work today then? Bit stupid wasn’t it?” He was leaning in towards Alex’s face, the fruity smell of beer pouring off him. “You must have known we were on for a session.”

“I said before. I had no choice,” said Alex, “there were no trains running. Not after the crash on the line last night.”

“Bad news. I saw that on the telly. You didn’t get caught up in it did you?”

Alex paused. He had the same feeling as earlier in the day: of a kind of ghost memory appearing in his head. “Nah, but the line was closed.” He felt his face reddening but Marshall had drunk too much to notice. The man leaned in again with a smirk, as if he was struggling to contain himself.

“I’ve got a secret Alex. If you knew what it was it would blow you away. Blow your mind.” Alex leaned away and moved to slide off the desk but Marshall blocked him. He moved even closer to Alex and lowered his voice. “I’ve got a ticket to the ride of your life. It’s like nothing you’ve ever seen or done. And if you’re really nice to me I might share it with you.” He giggled childishly and pulled back.

Alex got to his feet and frowned at him. “You’re a nutter Andrew. A bladdered one. Too many beers.”

The other man laughed so loudly that some of the others in the room looked around for a second before returning to their friends and their drinks. “You can say what you like Alex. I’m the one with the key to ...” he stopped mid sentence and his head went back slightly as he straightened up. The expression on his face had changed from a loose grin to an intense stare. “I could show you my secret.”

“So where is it then, in your sock drawer?” Alex’s sarcasm bounced off Marshall like he was armour plated.

“Nah, somewhere much better than that. I can show you right now if you want. If you can handle it. Which I doubt.”

Alex was bored with Marshall’s drunkenness but he quite fancied seeing his colleague make a fool of himself. “Yeah go on then,” he said. Marshall backed away and smiled again. He turned and walked towards the main office door, looking back just once as he weaved and swayed his way across the carpet. With each hand still clutching a bottle, he shouldered his way through the door and disappeared into the corridor.

Sometimes the biggest of decisions can depend on the smallest of things. Sometimes events so massive that they fill the pages of history books are formed and shaped by the most inconsequential of objects, places or even people. Like the silver face on the wall above Alex. Behind it, a tiny motor drove small plastic gears that hauled three spindly arms over its smooth metal surface. Second after second, minute after minute, hour after hour. Until then it had signalled nothing more crucial than the time to get a smoke or a coffee, or when to grab a coat or handbag and head out the door. But now it held the power to turn his life upside down. If it had been just five minutes fast it might have sent him down a different route but instead it told Alex Preston that he had time to spare before driving home. So he put his drink down on the edge of the desk and followed Marshall through the office door.