

# **TIME THIEF**

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## **DEDICATION**

To Eliene Do Amor Divino (my better half) for her eternal understanding and patience as the words fall out of my head and into the computer.

To the memory of the great H. G. Wells.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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*“There are really four dimensions, three of which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time.”*

(H.G. Wells, The Time Machine)

## THE RULES OF TIME TRAVEL

1. A traveller can only travel through time, not space. If he/she is at location A (in 2021) and wants to travel to location B (in 1989) the traveller must move to location B in the present (2021) and then travel to the past (1989).
2. A traveller cannot travel to the future from his/her original timeline's present.
3. A traveller (in the past) can only "future" travel to his previous origin. Examples:
  - i. Present-day is 2021. A traveller has travelled to the past, 1989. He/she can only return to 2021 (present-day)
  - ii. Present-day is 2021. A traveller has travelled to the past, 1989. He/she wants to travel to 2005. He has to return to 2021 (present-day) and then travel to 2005
  - iii. Present-day is 2021. A traveller has travelled to the past, 1989. He/she then travels further in the past to 1975. If he/she wants to return to 2021 (present-day), he has to travel from 1975 to 1989 *and then* 1989 to 2021

## **18:03, FRIDAY 17 MARCH 2073**

Avalon Hotel, Brixton, London SW9

It was dark and musty inside the wardrobe. Temporal Private Investigator, Aristotle Dunn, hated hiding in wardrobes but it was the best way to get his job done; the life of a TPI wasn't always what it was cracked up to be.

Ari peered through the gap between the ill-fitting doors into the dingy hotel room. The hotel rooms were always dingy. There was far too great a risk of cheating spouses being seen and recognised if they used upmarket hotels for their extramarital activities. The room looked like any one of dozens of hotel rooms that he'd staked-out before – a double bed with bedside cabinets, a tacky framed print or two on the side walls (this particular room was adorned with two less than interesting paintings of tulips in a vase), an outdated TV set (flat screen, but still of another age), and, of course, a wardrobe (in which he was ensconced).

Wardrobes were the best place from which to spy on and record extra-marital affairs. They were seldom used for what they were built for, the errant couples flinging their clothes off and not worrying about where they fell. Wardrobes were an irrelevancy put in the rooms on the off-chance that somebody might want to stay overnight.

Most of Ari's work came from spouses who wanted evidence of their partner's cheating to strengthen their negotiating positions when

discussing divorce settlements. He would much rather have been out solving great mysteries but such cases were few and far between so he put up with the bread-and-butter side of the business – catching cheating husbands and wives.

Ari had removed his top hat and collapsed it before time-jumping into the wardrobe, allowing himself more room to manoeuvre. There was never much space in wardrobes. He placed the hat alongside him on the wardrobe floor. It didn't fold completely flat like modern-day ceremonial toppers, as it sported two hat bands – the lower made of brown leather and affixed by rivets and the upper of black silk and secured by a metal buckle – that prevented it from depressing completely, but it folded enough for his purposes.

He always took up his viewing position at least five minutes before the rendezvous was due to take place, just in case the information he'd been given was incorrect. But it rarely was.

The room door opened and a smartly-dressed couple drifted into the incongruously sparsely-furnished room, giggling. The man – the wayward husband – wore a casual sports jacket over a white polo shirt, and a garishly checked pair of trousers. Ari guessed that he'd told his wife he was going out for a round of golf. Playing golf was a decent enough ruse. Golf courses did good business in 2073 – as they always had done – and he could have been telling the truth. However, once the man's wife had in her possession the video that Ari was just about to make,

the cat would well and truly be out of the bag.

The woman was young, with long jet black hair, a slim figure and legs that seemed to go on forever. The man, obese and with a face that looked like an overripe potato was a complete contrast to her. She was so far out of the man's league that Ari surmised that it was the man's wallet that held the attraction and was saying, loud and clear, *make this old fool feel like a young man again and he will buy you lots of expensive gifts.*

Ari took his cell phone from one of the two shallow pockets of his crushed velvet waistcoat, and pointed it through the gap at the couple who had started clawing at each other's clothing – not a pretty sight – and threw the discarded items onto the floor, not caring where they landed.

Ari directed the phone's camera lens towards the bed and pressed *record video*. His cell phone was one of the few items he owned that wasn't an homage to his true love, steampunk. As much as he disliked using it he had to acknowledge that it was an essential tool for his job.

The now naked couple made their way over to the bed, her sashaying sexily and him waddling. His belly rippled with each footstep whereas hers was taut and firm.

Ari hoped that the encounter would be a quickie. He drew no pleasure from watching other people fornicate.

The foreplay was thankfully rapid and, as far as Ari could tell, unsatisfying for the woman. She took a deep breath, and pushed the man gently away from her,



preparing herself for what was to come next.

Ari zoomed in on the action, not through any desire to witness close up what was about to happen but through a need to remove any ambiguity on the couple's identities. He hoped that this wasn't a portent of how the session would go. He needed a clear image of the man's face and to prove the betrayal beyond all doubt.

The woman wagged a finger at her obese lover.

"Uh, uh. No missionary. Not being funny, but you might break me."

The man conceded that this was a possibility and changed places with the woman so that he was lying on his back. Ari breathed a sigh of relief, as did the woman.

As soon as he had enough evidence, Ari took out his pocket watch. Ari's time-jumper was unique, unlike any other TPI's, in that it had been custom-made to be fit in with his dress-sense. Other TPIs had regular-looking wristwatches.

He twisted the winder in a clockwise direction and disappeared.

## **17:55, THURSDAY 23 MARCH 2073**

Avalon Hotel, Brixton, London SW9

Ari materialized in the same wardrobe, but six days in the future. He'd booked the room at the small down-market Brixton hotel for just a couple of hours. The receptionist hadn't been surprised at the short-term booking – most of the hotel's business was as a place for quick sexual encounters – but she'd been surprised that Ari was alone. Still, it wasn't for her to question what anybody got up to in their rooms. The Victorian-looking chap's money was as good as anyone else's.

Ari clambered out of the wardrobe, straightened up to his full height of five foot ten inches, popped his top hat back open, and placed it on his head. He didn't feel fully dressed without it.

Locking the door behind him, he trotted downstairs and tipped his hat to the receptionist as he left the building and headed home.

**07:47, FRIDAY 24 MARCH 2073**

Aristotle's home, Ealing, London W5

Ari's landline phone rang urgently, begging for attention. He was always awake and ready for work by seven-thirty in the morning and the candlestick telephone only needed to ring twice more before he attended to it, lifting the receiver off the switch hook to connect the archaic piece of equipment to the modern telephone network. Only one person had his number so he knew who was calling.

"Good morning, Tom. The De Vere case is in the bag. I'll bring it in for you to download tomorrow. Do you have another case for me?"

Tom Hinds had been Ari's agent for over five years now. It was Tom who fielded requests for Ari's services and flushed out those that appeared reluctant to pay the going rate for a Temporal Private Investigator. Ari was expensive but he was the best in Tom's stable with a 95% success rate; that kind of success ratio didn't come cheap. Only the wealthy could afford Ari's rates.

*"Morning, Ari. Yes, I do, though it's not as straightforward as most of your cases. The client has no idea where the target might be meeting his mistress. You're going to have to do some digging of your own for this one. It's for the wife of a scientist, Margaret Spencer. The husband is a Doctor William Spencer."*

Both Ari and Tom knew the name. Dr Spencer was a research scientist on Project Clockwise and was the man who had discovered the dimension unification

algorithm, the final piece of the puzzle that had led to the discovery of time travel. Ari wasn't fond of the way that some people thought of time travel as having been invented. Time travel had always existed (it was simply a mathematical equation applied to universal forces and harnessed to an algorithm that united dimensions) but he conceded that the tools with which to access it had needed to be invented.

He had a vague understanding of time travel, as a user, but he didn't have to know intimately how something worked to use it. He had his pocket watch which gave him the capability to travel backwards in time – forward time travel hadn't been perfected, although he could return from the past to his immediate point of origin – but he didn't need to know how it did what it did. He knew how to operate the watch and that was good enough for him.

*“So, Ari. Are you interested?”*

Of course, Ari was interested. He wasn't married – he wasn't even dating – and had very few outside interests. He was virtually wedded to his job.

*“I will take it. Please fax me over the details.”*

Tom sighed. Ari was his best investigator but he was fixed in his ways and those ways were eccentric, to say the least. Tom had insisted on Ari having a cell phone but the man obstinately refused to use anything but the camera functions. He wouldn't make or receive phone calls, he wouldn't use the email functionality, and he most certainly wouldn't use any of the apps that were installed on the phone. Ari was a living contradiction. He lived in the latter part of the

twenty-first century but would have felt much more comfortable in the mid-nineteenth century, as was reflected in his dress, home, and mannerisms.

Ari cut a dapper figure about town, dressed in his top hat, his velvet waistcoat with wide snakeskin lapels, his large-collared shirt with a loosely fastened long cravat, and his dark moleskin breeches tucked into long woollen gaiters. Of course, in 2073 the use of real snakeskin and moleskin was frowned upon, and Ari didn't approve of their use either, but the quality of the synthetic substitutes was so high that it would take a very keen eye to tell that they were fake. The whole ensemble was finished off with a pair of well-shined brogue shoes.

And then, of course, there were his smoked-glass goggles. He was never seen out of the house without his goggles resting on the bridge of his nose. Even when it was dark. It was only when he was behind closed doors in the privacy of his own home that he felt comfortable enough to remove the eyewear.

Ari surrounded himself with replicas and authentic items of Victorian technology, shunning the sleek designs of modern-day equipment in favour of the ornate and inherently fascinating designs of Victorian England. Wherever possible he would use the older technology but there were instances where design purity had to be sacrificed to allow integration between the old and the new. His fax machine was such a compromise, an adapted Elisha Gray telautograph machine which, to all intents and purposes, looked every inch the genuine article. It was

only on closer inspection that a connoisseur would be able to tell the difference, an alteration that allowed the machine to integrate with the rest of the national communications network.

Ari watched as the pen attached to his contraption transcribed Tom's message onto a piece of paper. Once it had stopped, he tugged on the paper until it came free. He nodded as he read the words on the paper, occasionally punctuating the silence with barely audible grunts. Having finished reading, he folded the paper into quarters and stuffed it into his right-hand trouser pocket.

**08:23, FRIDAY 24 MARCH 2073**

The British Library, Euston Road, London NW1

Ari had the whole internet at his disposal to seek out information but he preferred to do his research the old-fashioned way, by leafing through the printed word – in books. *Book books* as he liked to call them. A purist traditionalist, he was no fan of eBooks either and always, if possible, chose the immersive library experience of the British Library.

Spotting Ari's entrance, Susan, a friendly young woman with a permanent smile etched on her face, left a conversation with another staff-member and glided over to her client.

"Mr Dunn. How wonderful to see you. We haven't seen you for almost three weeks and were beginning to get a little worried."

Ari returned her smile and doffed his hat.

"Hello, Susan. I have been busy at work. There is nothing to worry about. Thank you for your concern though."

Susan continued smiling. Ari wondered if she had any other facial expressions in her repertoire.

"So, Mr Dunn, what are you looking for today?"

"Do you have an up-to-date biography of Doctor William Spencer?"

Susan thought for a few seconds.

"Isn't he one of the people that invented time travel?"

Ari winced a little inside at Susan's use of the word *invented* but didn't correct her. He nodded.

“Yes, Susan. That is the chap.”

Unsurprisingly, Susan smiled.

“I’ll check what we have on the system.”

She waved her hand and a holographic computer monitor appeared as if out of nowhere. She tapped the projected image half a dozen times and beamed at Ari.

“We received an updated edition just last Thursday. It’s at coordinates 31.247 by 19.902. Would you like a bibliodroid to fetch it for you?”

Ari shook his head.

“No thank you. I will find it myself.”

Ari enjoyed the walk among the hundreds of shelves in the library. Those containing older books had an indistinguishable musty smell that he relished whereas the newer books had a fresh clean smell. He found the diversity of size, colour, and shape of the books very pleasing to his eye. It was a walk during which he could relax and let the spirit of the library flow through him.

It took him a good five minutes to reach the correct section but he wasn’t concerned about the time. He scanned the shelves and spotted the book he was looking for, *Doctor William Spencer: A Biography*, an uninspiring but functional title.

Ari was a self-taught speed-reader and, despite the large number of pages in the book, he knew that it wouldn’t take much of his time. What he would be looking for was a sense of pattern, locations that were dear to the doctor and that he visited often. In his experience, he found that cheating partners would either frequent old haunts from their days of



singlehood in an attempt to regain the freedom of their youth or find completely new locations to practise their indiscretions. He hoped it would be the former – it would make his life a lot easier.

He opened the book and bypassed the title, copyright, and dedication pages. Doctor Spencer's infancy was also probably immaterial to the case although he'd revisit the scientist's childhood if he couldn't find anything useful from the chapters about his adolescence and young adulthood.

He ran his finger down the table of contents until it arrived at the germane chapter: *Coming of Age*.

Arriving at page forty-seven, his eyes clicked into gear and scanned the content line by line, accelerating through the words until something caught his attention. This was another instance when his cell phone proved its use. He didn't like compromising his principles but taking photos was a much quicker and more efficient way to record details and he would have a much more accurate record to work with.

Some sixth sense caused him to move his focus to the bottom of the page. Where there had once been words there was now a blank space. His eyes moved up the page to the three paragraphs that he had just read and he blinked incredulously as he watched the sentences evaporate before his very eyes, one letter at a time. Soon, there was nothing left but a blank page. He quickly flipped through the pages towards the back of the book but the rest of the book was completely blank. He returned to the front of the book just in time to take a quick photo of a table with the

doctor's personal details – birth name, date of birth, place of birth, profession, articles of note and achievements, parentage, spouse and children – before the text of the contents page, the dedication, the copyright notice, and the title page completely disappeared. A second later, he was left looking at his empty hand, no trace left of the book that he'd just been reading. He spoke out loud as if he wished to confirm with his own ears that he wasn't dreaming.

“This cannot be happening.”