

Prologue  
The past: 1967

The young woman tucked the thin blanket deep into the sides of the wicker basket and rearranged the embossed satin edging over the baby's chin. It was not long before the wide eyes peaked out over the rim, and little hands began to claw at the material that obstructed its view. The woman picked up a rubber toy from inside the cot and squeaked it a couple of times for encouragement. Hers, rather than the infant's, who offered not a flicker of reaction to the playful sound. His large brown eyes followed the woman everywhere. They wouldn't let go. She forced herself to look away. Recovering, she took the small white envelope from her pocket and placed it gently on the blanket. A solitary tear dropped from her eye and splashed onto the paper. The ink lettering on the surface ran like a watercolour, but after she had dabbed at it a couple of times with her hanky, the writing was still legible. *'Please open'* it said.

Something made the woman look up. In the distance she noticed the thick white clouds billowing up above the trees, driving relentlessly towards the station. The eerie sight increased her anxiety and she hurried herself with her preparations. It would be all right, she told herself. The baby's cries would draw attention to his presence. She gave him one last kiss, then straightened up and walked briskly away. Along the platform and over the footbridge she hurried, glancing nervously at the pounding smoke nearly upon her. A second later, she disappeared into the oblivion of the exploding cumulus.

Back in the basket, the baby's eyes continued their radar scan, trying to find something to latch onto. Seconds later, without apology or conscience, the 11.04 slammed past the station. As it thundered its way through, the glass windowpanes

of the waiting room quivered in fear, the thin wooden walls shuddered uncontrollably.

All the while the iron monster was wreaking its noisy havoc the length of the platform, the baby's face remained impassive, unmoved, fearless. Anyone close enough to observe the tiny button irises might have detected small gleams of pleasure dancing within the deep brown spheres.

The station was still trembling as the 2-4-4-2 and its eight clattering charges disappeared into the parallax of the receding track. The moment it was out of range, the moment silence drifted back to the station, the baby's face began to crease and pucker.

Seventy feet away, just as the duty ticket collector was stirring the sugar into his mid-morning tea, and his mouth was savouring the first sweet shards of a *Rich Tea*, a deafening cry rent the air which nearly caused the man's heart to stop, and a piece of biscuit to take the wrong track down his windpipe.

1.

The present: 1995

'Weird' Cliff thought there was nothing so sublime, so irresistible, so magic, as the faint clicking, the sudden pinking, the rising impatient twanging, which announced the impending explosion. The feeling was always the same. Always gave the same jolt, the same rush, even though the subtlety of the warning sounds might vary infinitely. As soon as his senses had locked into that sonar twitching, as soon as his ears caught that mini-tambourine flourish, his heart would rapidly go into overload, his insides turn to goo. There were times when he almost couldn't bear the suspense. Yet a second later, it would all be over. The metal monster would appear, screaming around the bend, big as a house, carrying its shop window display of dummies to their destinations.

Sometimes there was no warning at all. Sometimes the train just screeched into view out of nowhere. Sometimes there was just a momentary leafy branch-shake of the track before the demon was upon them. Whatever the method of entrance, Cliff always experienced the same glorious intimacy with the early warning sound, like some earnest marine biologist in private oceanic communication with complex whale codes.

On this occasion, the sighting brought with it the ultimate reaction - a smile - in Cliff's case a rather sinister affair that rippled like a splitting ice-flow across the blank wasteland that constituted his eternally youthful 34 year-old face.

'7629!' he bleated inwardly to himself. *Taaaaaaaall!!!*

With his tongue grimly stretching back the contours of his mouth like a schoolboy deep in homework concentration, Cliff's powerful grip painstakingly etched the precious cipher into his logbook.

He glanced around him. All four platforms were virtually empty now. Another long summer's day was coming to an end and it was nearly time to go home. His Aunt tended to worry if he got back any later than midnight. Was there time for one last 'cop' before bed? He decided that there was. The platform clock clacked relentlessly forward. 11.15...11.20...11.25...11.30. Cliff's gaze followed the moonlit, hairline reflections of disappearing track, as his bulbous eyes frantically tried to penetrate the inky distance. Everything, even the trees, seemed to be holding their breath.

Agonising minutes later, on the point of abandoning his vigil, Cliff suddenly picked out a pinprick of travelling yellow light. With the element of surprise lost, the object of his visual stealth reluctantly broke cover and quickly passed through the station, surrendering a clear view of its four-digit livery.

Before his hasty hand could finish scribbling down the precious number, the suction of the carriages began tugging at Cliff's paper. With a smack, the harsh slipstream snatched his log, bearing it upwards on the obstinate wind. For a while, the precious page somersaulted carelessly on the air, performing a couple of cheeky *loop de loops* for its distinctly unappreciative audience, before soaring higher in disdain.

Cliff began to moan - a deep, bovine reverberation that his body triggered off in times of stress. Panic-stricken, he frantically propelled himself forward, wiry arms and hands flailing and crossing at every teasing dive. Oblivious to his plight, the paper glided ever higher, before vanishing into the luminous void of the platform end. Cliff dashed to the platform end and, without concern for his safety, slipped over the side and scuttled awkwardly over the stone-stubbed ground in pursuit of his lost treasure.

After a few desperate moments, his determination was duly rewarded with a glimpse of something white scuttling along the ground by a nearby siding. In the exaggerated motions of a demented moon-walker, Cliff arched his body over each deadly rail, slowly negotiating his way to the far side of the tracks, all the while keeping a rolling eye firmly on both horizons for signs of moving lights. By now the bouncing papery fugitive seemed to be tiring of its little game, and like a dog that has strayed too far from its master in search of some elusive scent, seemed to be signalling that its little adventure had come to an end.

As he edged closer to his treasure, Cliff suddenly noticed an object on the ground. It was a videotape box. Instinctively, he picked it up. It looked almost new and he shook it curiously. The tape was still inside. The name and address of the owner were printed on the front, but it was no name, no address he recognised. Certainly no 'spotter' he knew. Cliff looked about him, as if the owner of the tape might still be around. He suddenly caught a glimpse of a second, much larger object a few yards further up the track. Shoving the tape inside his wind-jacket, he walked towards the long and incongruous object. It was draped in yellow canvas - though the canvas, it seemed to Cliff, looked suspiciously like a man's raincoat, the package ominously human in form.