

**ALTERED**  
**ESTATES**

CHRIS MATHISON

**A L T E R E D**  
**E S T A T E S**

C H R I S M A T H I S O N



GREENLEAF  
BOOK GROUP PRESS

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Published by Greenleaf Book Group Press  
Austin, Texas  
[www.gbgroup.com](http://www.gbgroup.com)

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Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group  
Cover Images: ©iStockphoto/MediaProduction and ©iStockphoto/  
designer29  
Interior Images: ©iStockphoto/duncan1890, ©iStockphoto/VIKTORIIA  
KOTOVA, and ©iStockphoto/ Nastasic

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Print ISBN: 979-8-88645-123-8 eBook ISBN: 979-8-  
88645-124-5

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

24 25 26 27 28 29 30 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

# Prologue

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**K**ris Robinson, exhausted after yet another grueling day of getting into character, stands and stretches. How it got so late, he hardly knows. He calls out, “Elevate screen,” to his smart desk, yawning as the embedded screen rises from beneath. He reckons he’s watched this upcoming clip at least fifty times. He pauses to look around his temporary quarters one last time, knowing if all goes according to plan, he won’t be back.

The apartment is dimly lit, except for overhead lights that hit posters of several Pixar and Disney films, as well as a photo of the original Tame Impala Project from two decades ago. A selection of their early neo-psych tunes plays softly in the background. An open laptop displays a 3D holographic version of the classic computer game *Myst*, with the island and the rocket ship in miniature floating above. On a nearby shelf sit several hardbacks. Their spines display works by Carl Jung, Julian Jaynes, Stephen Hawking, and others, on topics like synchronicity, bicameralism, plant intelligence, AI gaming, and chronesthesia. Kris marvels at how those fringe ideas from his younger days are now front and center in pop culture. Damn, he muses to himself, they’re all practically mainstream now—who knew?

Kris puts on a headset with an attached microphone. “You say this is the last one and this is the last time I have to watch it. Promise?” He listens for a moment, then asks, “So, just to make sure, it happens first thing in the morning, just after I arrive at the office, right?” Again, he listens, then replies, “Yes, I’ve taken them all except the last one, which is right here.”

Kris places a palm on his head, furrows his brow, and listens intently.

“Okay, thanks. I understand,” he says. “I’m not worried about getting or being there. Just hope I can return with no problem. That’s always the tricky part. Wish me luck.”

He removes the headset and presses the Play button. On-screen, Kris sees himself—fortyish, toned, handsome—inside a cubicle, staring at computer code. The sound of a woman clearing her throat causes the on-screen Kris to swivel around. “Hey, Andrea,” he greets warmly. “My, but you’re in early this morning.”

“Oh, Kris,” says Andrea, a tall, thirtysomething brunette wearing formal business attire and a pained expression. “I wish it was a happier occasion.” Her eyes well up as she hands him a sealed envelope. “I am so sorry.”

Kris watches himself intently as, on-screen, he opens the envelope and skims its contents. “Let go?” he asks. Andrea’s silence confirms his assumption. “Tell me why.”

“Not just you, Kris,” Andrea replies, sweeping her hand in the general direction of other cubicles, “the entire division.”

“You too?”

She nods slowly. “Yeah. Me too. The acquisition team says we are redundant. The buyers have all our roles covered with their own people.”

The clip ends. Kris removes his headset, switches off the monitor, and slowly exhales.

Kris believes he’s viewed this clip and other recent “life events” more than enough times. Ready to call it a night, he regards that lone remaining vial he must consume. Shaking his head in resignation, Kris raises the vial high and toasts, “Cheers!” He gulps down the liquid. Smiling, he calls out to the empty room, “Hey, isn’t anybody going to say, ‘Break a leg?’”

Unexpectedly, just as he’s about to stand up and leave the room, Kris hears a male voice from just outside his right ear. ***Break a leg!***

Kris’s head snaps in the direction of the voice. He’s stunned to see a three-dimensional, miniature countenance of an elderly bearded man floating in the air above him.

Then the apparition chimes in jovially, as a toastmaster might, ***Imagine—a sip, a swallow, and voilà! A tabula rasa!***

Kris’s body tenses as he calls out, “Who are you? Where are you?” ***Do not fear us. We are your Storytellers.***

With that reply, the old man disappears. Kris blinks hard and claps the side of his head. He steps back, exclaiming, “I really don’t understand!” His pulse quickens, and his hands tremble. “I should see a doctor for this, right? A shrink perhaps?” he asks plaintively.

No one appears, but a voice echoes: *You don’t need to see anyone*

At this, Kris feels as if he’s received some sort of Jedi mind trick or hypnotic command. It calms him down a little. He now believes he doesn’t need to see anyone—everything is probably fine.

Finally, he asks, “What story?” *Yours*. “You mean,” Kris supposes, “whatever’s going to happen to me as a result of all this preparation, all the hypnosis, all these drugs I took over the past three days?” *Correct*.

Kris hears but doesn’t see anyone now. He touches his forehead, then continues, “Only now I can’t even remember what the drugs were, why I took them, or what’s supposed to happen.”

*Yes, but it’s already happened*. Kris stands straight up and squints, trying hard to recall whatever it was that happened. He draws a complete blank. “But . . . I have no memory of it,” he calls out. *That’s why we’re here. To retell what happened*. “And then I’ll *remember*? If that’s even the right word to use?” *Depends on your mindset. And location in Time*.

Kris wonders silently what “mindset” and “location in time” mean. His thought receives an immediate reply: *For example, your present location in Time is—*

“Whoa, it also reads my thoughts,” Kris blurts out. From above, the old man’s face reappears and breaks into a warm smile as he speaks to Kris in a fatherly way. *Think to us. Or speak to us, good friend. Doesn’t matter. Congratulations. Your mind is becoming bicameral*.

Kris tries to think of what to say or project next. Maybe something about his future? Finally, he asks aloud, “Will I get my job back or find another one soon? I’m nearly broke and really worried.”

The old man is dismissive. *Forget your job. Far greater things await*.

“Like what? Tell me,” Kris implores. An elderly woman now appears overhead, and Kris stumbles a step back. *No spoilers, dearie!* she admonishes in a British accent. *You’ll find out when your story comes to them*.

“So there’s more than one of you here?” *An infinite number, actually. But don’t worry. We won’t all talk at once.*

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Kris laughs and notices he’s starting to relax a little. “Who are you really? Where do you come from?”

The original bearded gentleman speaks: *You’ve just ingested cerebral blockers, correct?*

“Yeah, I think so,” Kris stammers. “Maybe. Did I? Wait. Now I’m not sure. I can’t remember. Now I can’t even think straight about any of this. Nobody told me about you people. What are ‘blockers’ anyway?”

*Doesn’t matter. The ink of our presence as a rather unforeseen consequence of taking those drugs you no longer recall.*

Yet another Storyteller, a middle-aged male, appears, looking puzzled. *To tell the truth, we’re every bit as confounded as you are.* Kris turns to the new apparition on his right, steps back, and asks, “Why do you say that?”

This Storyteller looks and sounds American. *It’s been years, thousands, actually, since we’ve spoken to a living soul. And we’ve never been able to communicate with a conscious one before now.*

“So who did you talk to way back then?” *Unconscious souls. Primitives who didn’t know who they were. All we could do was tell them where to go, what to do. They thought we were God speaking, commanding them.*

“So I’m the quote-unquote conscious one? Okay. Whatever . . . Jeez, what’s next?”

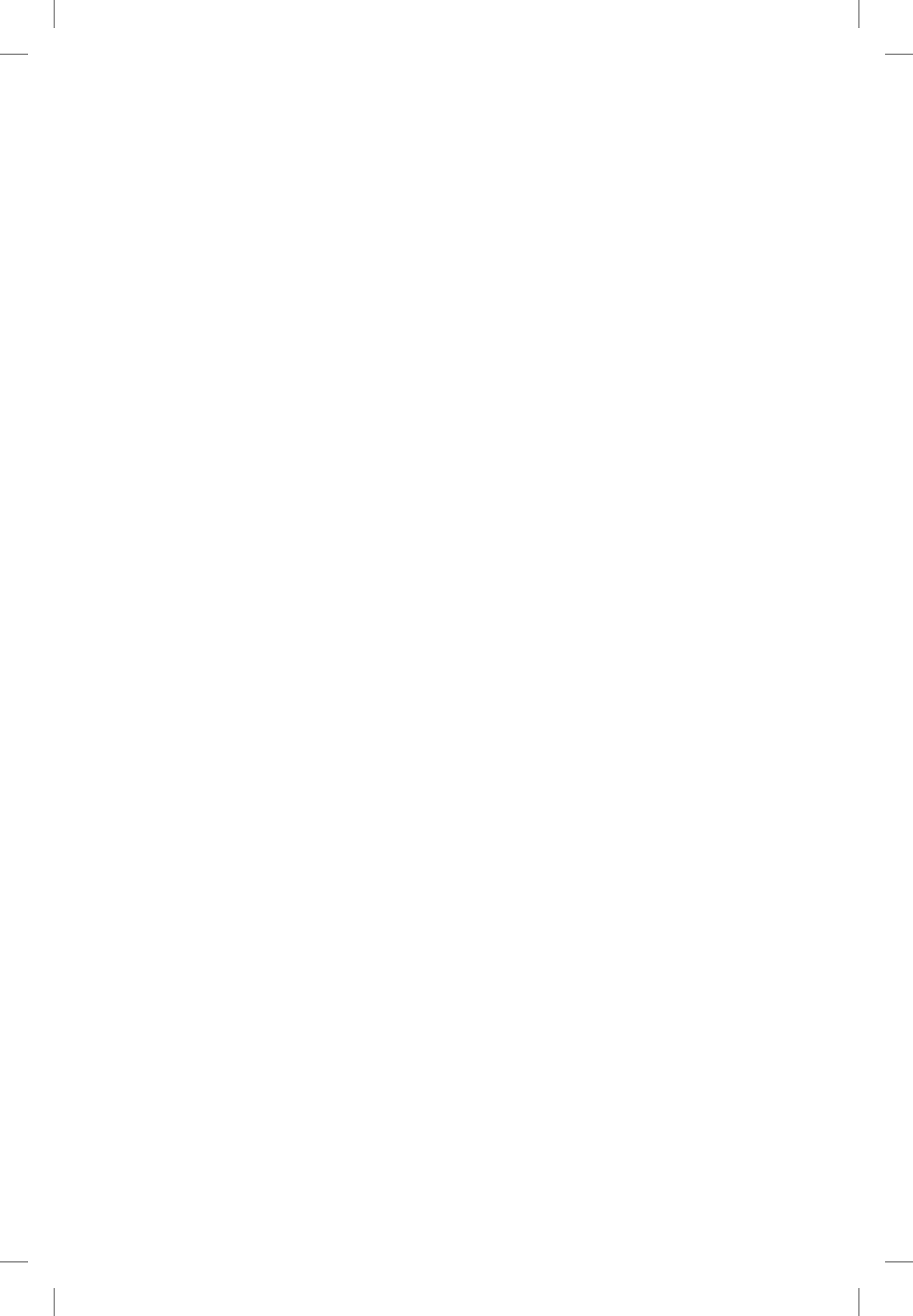
*Your story. Your wondrous story!* the voices call in unison.

PART ONE

THE JOURNEY









## Chapter One

---

**T***wice upon a Time, murmurs a voice, your story begins anew. Listen well and relive fully.*

A knock at the door. You have no idea how long you were out as you slowly rise from the couch, gazing at the smiling face with the flowing white beard floating above, and stumble to open the door.

Standing there is a courier asking you to sign for a packet. What in the world? The packet has come from “Allensby, Bixby, Crosby & Sons & Daughters, Barristers and Solicitors” from a town in England you’ve never heard of. There are several items inside, the largest of which is a beautifully handwritten letter on stationery emblazoned with a coat of arms. You’re not sure, but the script seems to momentarily flash before your eyes.

*My beloved child,*

*My name is Arthur Hanover, and what I am about to tell you may come as rather a shock: I am your uncle, a relative you never knew existed and about whom no one has ever spoken. I have chosen this moment to reveal my existence because I am the last of my line and am growing old. More importantly, you will be named in my will*

*as the inheritor of my title and estate. This includes my ancestral home, Hanover Manor.*

*In order to secure your inheritance, however, there are some documents that must be presented by you to the local probate court. This will require that you come to England.*

*To that end, I have enclosed an assortment of vouchers good for first-class travel to London and onwards to my estate. In addition, there is a cheque for £40,000, an amount I trust will be sufficient to cover your expenses during your journey.*

*You may, of course, choose to ignore this invitation and simply cash the enclosed cheque. The world is in such a state these days that I would not be surprised if you did. However, if I've assessed your character correctly, you are neither faint of heart nor lacking a sense of adventure. If you do make the journey, what awaits you besides wealth, property, and title is this:*

*a complete explanation of your relationship to me. Curiosity, I am certain, is what propels gifted people like yourself through life.*

*But for reasons I cannot disclose, I must urgently request that you tell no one of this letter or your plans. It is for your own good, my child. After the court receives the documents, you may say and do as you please.*

*Finally, as a reassurance that I am who I say, I've included a copy of my entry in Burton's Peerage.*

*Affectionately,*

*Arthur Hanover  
Hanover Manor*

You double-check the addressee, but it's you and only you. Smiling, you suppose that this might be an elaborate prank and try to guess who among your friends may have engineered it. Or maybe it's simply the most elaborate junk mailing you've ever received. You look for a sweepstakes offer, the come-on, the fine print—there isn't any.

The packet contains an unsealed envelope stamped with the British Airways logo. Inside is an authentic-looking "Gift of Travel" voucher with instructions on how to redeem it. The tickets will be round trip, first class,

open-ended, and good for one year. Also inside, is a voucher from a British limousine service, Browns Chauffeur Hire, which states you'll be met at either Heathrow or Gatwick, depending on your flight. A Bentley limousine has been reserved and will transport you to and from a destination listed as "Hanover Manor." Behind the vouchers is a sealed envelope from Barclays Bank containing a draft made out to you for the amount stipulated in the letter—if this is a hoax, boy, someone has gone to a lot of trouble.

Another item is a reprint from the latest edition of *Burton's Peerage and Baronetage*. It's a capsule biography of one Arthur Reynold Hanover, with myriad references to his ancestors, who from medieval times have progressed from barons to viscounts to marquises. None of the names belong to anybody related to you—or at least not that you know of. Finally, there is a small blue envelope affixed with a red wax seal and bearing a handwritten message on the outside:

*Open this only if you remain truly undecided  
whether to come. Otherwise, it's best that you  
discard it unread. A.H.*

Your phone vibrates. UK area code. A video call. An older man appears, partly in shadow. The alleged Arthur Hanover begins reciting the letter in the rich, cultured voice of a trained Shakespearean actor.

"Are you serious?" you shout.

Hanover pauses and looks at you. "I am very serious."

"You can't possibly be my uncle!"

"But I am." Hanover is unmoved, his tone grave. "Please pay attention. You have a limited time to act, especially should I meet my demise."

Stunned and now vaguely concerned, you walk around the room, waving your arms. "Am I on hidden camera?"

Lord Hanover shakes his head no, then speaks slowly with a measured tone. "Forgive me, but we both know you've lost your employment. You should seriously consider your next steps."

This hits like a gut punch, and your voice shakes with emotion. “I just got my notice this morning. Haven’t told a soul. How could you possibly know?”

Hanover doesn’t answer directly, only saying, “Reread my letter. Deposit the check. Come home to England.” The call ends.

You reread the letter while replaying the call, now certain this is no frivolous joke or advertising ploy. But how in the world did he know you just got the ax? You’re tempted to call someone. *Anyone*, really. Maybe to confirm you aren’t crazy, or maybe just to talk some sense into you. But something keeps you from calling.

The reprint doesn’t tell you much, but Arthur Hanover sounds highly accomplished: a member of Britain’s Academy of Science and on the boards of several genealogical societies. You know that the British Isles is a region that takes bloodlines very seriously.

Then it hits you. Really hits. You sit down to catch your breath. One of your parents has a half brother, about whom they themselves may or may not know anything. Or maybe it’s a secret from you. Did one of your own dear grandmothers once give birth to a child no one in the family knows about? Or was it one of your grandfathers who sired this Hanover character? Okay, so what if there’s really some uncle out there you never knew you had? You could adjust to that.

But hold on. A family secret withheld from you alone until now, at the request of Arthur Hanover? To protect *his* reputation, or that of *your* grandparents—maybe as a condition of being named in his will? So now the end is near, and at long last it’s time to inform you. That fits.

After traveling around in circles, your mind lands on another looming question, one you probably should have asked first: Why you? Why not leave everything to your mother or father? Then there’s that salutation: *My beloved child*. God, you can hardly bear to think it—what if he’s actually your father, and “uncle” is just a cover story designed to protect you and your parents, regardless of whether they’re privy to these latest developments? Unfortunately, that fits, too. But it’s too painful, so you shove that possibility aside.

If this Arthur Hanover really is some fabulously wealthy British lord, a scientist, an expert in genealogical matters, then he should be all over the Internet, right? Of course.

Your search results in a slew of links to sites and Twitter feeds solely concerned with the doings of the British nobility. There are numerous photos. Your “uncle” looks like the elderly man he is, but still solidly built. His face is noble and wise. In some pictures, his hair is long and curly—like that of an aging rocker. In others, it’s closely cropped as he sports a mustache and a goatee. Often, he’s pictured with another British noble, a Lord Dennis Rollinsby, a rotund, jolly-looking experimental physicist who is apparently his close friend.

You see nothing of yourself in Hanover’s face and features. What you do see, gazing down beside you, is that small, disturbing envelope whose seal, for some reason, prevents you from breaking it just yet.

“Open only if you’re truly undecided.”

Clicking down the rabbit hole of Arthur Hanover leads you to a site entirely devoted to the Hanover residence. In a catalog of images, you find one spectacular, breathtaking room after another—a blaze of gold, silver, brass, marble, wood, exquisite fabrics and tapestries, wood carvings and furniture, antiques, and artwork.

It’s an ancient mansion, but to you, everything looks brand-new. One of the images links back to a BBC documentary that was aired just last year. From the beginning of the program, which you find on YouTube, it’s obvious that your “uncle” enjoys his lord-of-the-manor role to the fullest. The on-camera narrator, a tall, winsome man who looks to be fifty something, begins, “Lord Hanover has retained the full-time services of a concierge, one Adrienne Van Scoy, to arrange dinner parties and balls, drama festivals, and the amateur golf tournaments the marquis is fond of hosting.”

You press the 3DHolo button and watch as the scene enlarges and envelopes the room. The camera briefly shows the concierge addressing a visiting group in Italian, then the shot returns to the narrator. “Van Scoy, a Dutch-English dual citizen, is fluent in seven languages and curates the manor’s periodic art exhibitions.” You’re highly impressed—and immediately attracted to this statuesque brunette. You walk into the scene



to stand beside her. Meeting you, Adrienne—that alone could be worth the trip.

Now the camera pans outside. “Eighteen months ago,” the narrator states, “Lord Hanover personally oversaw the complete renovation of the exteriors and interiors of Manor House proper, the auxiliary buildings, and grounds.”

He turns, sweeping his hand before numerous period buildings. “The end result of this mammoth undertaking is, as you can see, a stunning collection representing architectural styles—from medieval and Perpendicular to Tudor, from Stuart to Hanoverian and Victorian. But, regardless of epoch, they’re all newly built and in pristine condition, like an English town in a theme park or one of those re-created historical villages one often finds.”

Asked why he was attempting to pay homage to seven centuries of classic British architectural tradition, Lord Hanover steps into the scene and unapologetically states, “I once attended Disneyland, where I saw three centuries of American civilization rolled into a single park, a place that is not even half the size of this estate. I came away inspired.” You chuckle at that, wondering what it would be like, long-lost uncle or not, to actually meet this guy in person.

Now the scene switches to the kitchen, where several cooks are preparing pastries. “My recipe uses raisins, not currants,” a chef boasts to the camera. He glances over at a rotisserie, in which a giant slab of beef is rotating. “*Eh, ça va, la vache?*”

The narrator snickers, explaining that Chef Noël Elle Léon is enamored of palindromes and has called out to an assistant, “Hey, how’s the cow?”

It appears this newly hired French chef replaced a Hungarian who was dismissed in a hurry. The narrator, his account punctuated by chuckles, explains, “It seems a group of distinguished guests had suffered hallucinations after sampling a dish that included wild mushrooms from the manor grounds while sipping a mysterious pinkish tea that tasted anything but English. It was reported that numbers of the titled nobility were either collapsing in hysterical fits on the grass or frolicking indecently in the bushes.”

The program introduces another servant notable in his own right—Reginald McCabe, the doorman, a short, stocky, powerfully built Scot. McCabe, says the narrator, has worked at top hotels on every continent and owns the world's largest collection of doorman uniforms. As the camera pans to the uniforms in close-up, you walk over to examine them more closely; they look like nothing so much as a huge multicolored fan. "McCabe," the narrator says brightly, "is considered by many hoteliers around the globe to be the world's greatest doorman!"

The tour next moves to a wine cellar, and you learn of Hanover Manor's estate-labeled wines and how they commission a French vineyard to grow the grapes and bottle the wine. A servant named Thomas Sutherland, an excessively handsome twentysomething, explains that the winery corks and labels the Hanover vintages only on the last day of February in leap years. "We will bottle no wine before its time . . . which is leap day," the young man adds with a facetiously prideful smile.

"So, if we were to uncork the one you're holding," the narrator asks, "roughly how much are we talking about?"

"This being a midseventies *Bourgogne*," Sutherland replies, "my guess would be in the neighborhood of sixty thousand pounds."

Says the narrator, "A thousand quid per sip. Impressive."

You hit the Pause button, and the holographic panorama collapses; you've seen enough for now.

Well, one way to shed some quick light on the situation is to call British Airways. The reservations operator asks for the code numbers on your voucher, then says, "Would you like to reserve your flight?"

"May I inquire as to who purchased these tickets?" you ask. "They were a gift."

"I've no idea, since no credit card was used."

"Bitcoin, then?"

"Sorry, no idea."

"Is the ticket transferable?"

"The voucher is nontransferable," she says. "But you can exchange your tickets for those of equivalent value to another destination."

"How about a cash refund?"

“If you turn in your voucher,” she replies, “the corporate office will mail you a check.”

Good to know. You’ll get back to them. For now, you make a quick trip to your bank and show the Barclays draft to the teller, who takes it over to her manager. The teller returns and informs you that the check is good and it can be deposited and credited immediately. She checks the exchange rate for you before you endorse and deposit it, which is irrelevant, really, since to you it’s simply free money either way.

Back home, you place an international call to Browns Chauffeur Hire and get the same story as you did from British Airways: you may use the voucher or cancel and apply for a refund. Oh yes, the clerk well remembers the young lady who came in last week and made the arrangements. The woman herself was a chauffeur, or so she said. “As if I could forget her, Ms. Savannah Reddy! Sashayed in she did, tight leather pants, removed her helmet, and all that blonde hair fell down. Well, that was a sight the drivers went on about. Then tore off raucously on her motorcycle. Humph! Chauffeur indeed. And from the manor.”

“Where is this Hanover Manor?” you ask.

“In the North. The Lake District, I’m told.” She says the driving directions are in a sealed envelope on her desk.

This sparks a bright idea. As an inveterate “early adopter,” you’d recently jumped on your satellite provider’s new international package, which brings in thousands of local channels from all over the world. If ever there was a time to try this gizmo out, it’s now. You check the township on the packet from the law firm and use Google Maps to locate it and other nearby villages—Loonton, Nuttey, and Witless. You grab your remote and tap in the numbers for a station—oddly named TVTV—that that appears to cover the tri-county area surrounding Hanover Manor.

You’re startled to hear the opening bars from the old TV series *The X-Files* playing. But this is not an episode. It’s the morning news.

**Remember those musical notes.** It sounds like one of those voices again—but why does it want you to remember a theme song for a TV show from over thirty years ago? “Storyteller?” you shout, casting about for the source of the voice.

But no one's floating overhead or answering invisibly. You wonder if maybe your smart speaker is uttering random stuff. It happens occasionally. On-screen, you see two smiling anchors, one male and one female. In the upper right corner, a semitransparent revolving logo reading "TVTV" is superimposed. The caption at the bottom reads:

**CROP CIRCLE MYSTERY SOLVED BUT UFO-ERS, X-FILERS  
UNCONVINCED**

You press the button, wondering if the 3DHolo feature works on these overseas stations. You're jazzed to see that it does. The entire newscast is projected into the room. You walk into the scene and stand behind the news desk.

The female anchor is speaking: "And now for a story that has gripped the entire region and beyond. The Village TV has a guest correspondent on the scene. Raemond Starr, from *The Hollywood Reporter*, has journeyed here from Tinsel Town due to the sensation this story caused among film producers. Rae, we're told a local farm has been besieged with visitors from near and far. What on earth—or *off* it—is going on?"

The window enlarges, filling the screen. Rae, a slender man in his thirties, is standing beside a tall cowman dressed in overalls. "That's right, Meredith. Last Monday, Loonton cowman Donald McFarquarson discovered his one hundred fifty cattle in a fractious state at three a.m."

Rae extends his microphone to McFarquarson, who says, "I found the lot of 'em trembling and lowing their great silly heads off. I'd no idea what they were on about then, but it took me hours to settle everything down."

The window shrinks as Meredith continues: "Only later, in the morning light and from a nearby hill, did Mr. McFarquarson glimpse the reason for the commotion. His distraught charges had been huddled inside one of several enormous crop circles—an occasional phenomenon much fancied by UFO followers. Michael, you have more on that, right?"

The camera swings over to the male anchor seated behind the news desk. "Yes, Meredith, we do. Now, a more prosaic explanation has emerged. According to police inquiries, McFarquarson's neighbor, Colin Fyfe-Bibchester, hijacked an experimental all-terrain hovercraft on display

at a nearby army base, then drove it onto McFarquarson's property. Once there, he circled the latter's cattle several times before eventually fleeing and abandoning the vehicle."

A backdrop of stills shows the hovercraft and the circles described. You wonder if you'll soon be rich enough to purchase one to pilot over the manor grounds. You sure hope so. Early adoption is a big part of your "thing."

"According to Fyfe-Bibchester," Michael explains, "he carried out the act for insults McFarquarson had directed at his sheep during a local livestock show."

The broadcast briefly inserts a prerecorded interview with the sheep rancher, who is short and speaks with a thick Scottish brogue. "The man was making fun of my flock. Calling them fuzzy, bleating wimps, as if his lot were some sort of bovine superheroes, which I definitely proved they were not."

The camera swings back to Meredith, who says, "Meanwhile, following widespread reports of the incident, McFarquarson's farm has been besieged by UFO researchers from throughout the British Isles and Europe, and by *X-Files*' show producers from America, who say they want to use the circles and the cattle in a pilot to hopefully spark a third reboot of the series. Rae, what does McFarquarson have to say about all this hullabaloo on his ranch?" The scene changes to McFarquarson's ranch again filling the shot.

A slow pan reveals several groups walking around with Geiger counters, recording devices, and other scientific measuring equipment. You decide to join them. Some are kneeling down, examining with magnifying glasses the hoofprints and other markings. Still others are inside the circles measuring circumferences and the like.

Rae turns back to the rancher, asking what he thinks.

"They're quite an excitable lot," McFarquarson replies, gesturing at the throng, "jumping about all goggled-eyed, measuring things, and babbling at each other. I've told them what really happened, but they don't seem to believe me. They say the truth is still out there."

“It may well be,” Michael says with a sly smile as an illuminated “The Village News at 7” graphic spins into view, settling just below the news desk.

Meredith nods at her coanchor and smiles before turning directly to the camera. “That concludes our early morning broadcast. We do hope to see you back here right at eleven, when we shall be joined in studio by renowned experimental physicist Lord Dennis Rollinsby, who will tell us what he believes is really going on at Donald McFarquarson’s dairy farm.”

A photo of the jovial noble fills the backdrop as Meredith adopts a playful smile, saying, “And it’s *not* what you’re thinking.”

Apparently for fun, the production crew decides to play more measures from the *X-Files* theme and run more footage of UFO sleuths roaming the property in an extended program close.

***Remember those first four notes.***

Now you’re certain you hadn’t imagined it, or that Google mistakenly voiced it, a moment ago. You look up and spot several smiling faces.

Right . . . Those measures are distinctive. Of course you’ll remember them—have for decades. Used to have it as your cell’s ringtone. Okay now, you decide, to get back to deciding.

For the umpteenth time, you glance at the as-yet-unopened letter, then at the travel vouchers and your deposit slip. They amount to well over fifty thousand dollars. You might need to find out about the legalities, any taxes involved, et cetera. But still, there should be a substantial sum remaining, right? And you’ve done nothing wrong, right?

*So, do I go or not go? Dude, just go, why don’t’cha?* a bubbly teenage girl, one you hadn’t seen before, calls out. It looks like these Storytellers come in all shapes and sizes—and ages!

“But why should I?” you ask. “I’ve now got more than enough money to get me through this.” But the girl is insistent: ***Look! Listen!***

An incredible life-sized, three-dimensional scene shimmers into view. Your jaw drops. You see yourself seated at a long table facing a cast of costumed characters from *Alice in Wonderland*—a riotous collection of human actors and CGI creations. One of them glances up and says, “I daresay you’ve never even spoke to Time.”

The scene dissolves into Lord Hanover's face that then morphs into a painted portrait of a nobleman, followed by your alleged uncle's appearance in a steamy bathroom mirror. The image cuts to a swimming pool in which he's floating face up, then to yet another breathtaking image, one that projects his enormous visage high in a moonlit sky as clouds rush by. In each tableau, his lips are moving, but you can't hear any speech.

Then comes a staggering sight you can scarcely believe. Your heart skips several beats. Again, you see yourself, this time seated at the judges table on a glittering TV set reminiscent of *American Idol*. On your left, sits Raemond Starr, the reporter you just saw on the news. On your right, Lord Hanover *himself*. Now, your mouth is agape—because Starr and Hanover look maybe ten or fifteen years younger. But shock! In the vision, you look the same. Not the least bit younger yourself.

On stage, stand three Asian girls, apparently contestants, who somehow seem familiar. After a moment or two, the assemblage collapses into a colorful blur, then slowly melts away.

You look up at the ceiling and, hoping one or more will appear, call out, "Hey, Storyteller, were those scenes from my future?" After a moment, a middle-aged professorial-sounding one does.

***Depends on your location in Time. From one vantage point, it's already happened. From another, it's yet to occur.*** "And when . . . it's actually happening?" ***Then you're inside Time.*** "Like now?" ***Yes, like now. Inside, there is only now. Outside, there is only then and soon.*** "So, were those actual scenes if, say, I go?" ***Yes, but they've already happened.*** "You mean I've already been?" ***It depends.*** "Confusing . . . So am I now 'speaking to Time'—whatever the heck that means?"

The Storyteller breaks into a wide smile. ***Actually, Time has been speaking to you.***

You wander into your bedroom, undress, and lie down, certain that this was just about the weirdest experience you've ever had. Yet it was amazing, amusing, and only a little scary in the beginning. And those voices—sometimes responding to your thoughts; at others, to your spoken words. And all so effortlessly.

But if they are Storytellers, again you wonder, what is the story?

A lovely female face appears and answers: *This one, the one we're retelling as you're reliving. Twice upon a Time!*



## Chapter Two

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**Y**ou can't believe it.

Or rather, you can't believe *yourself*. You've lived with this inheritance thing for almost twenty-four hours now, and you not only haven't

told anybody but haven't opened that second letter, either.

This morning you're hyperfocused on your alleged uncle saying, regardless of how you decide—to go or to not go—it would be “best” if his other letter were never opened. Does that mean whatever's inside could be disturbing, could make you less likely to go? Or more likely? And how long do you have to “remain undecided,” anyway, in order to be officially undecided? In which case, Lord Hanover *wants* you to open the letter. Damn, now you know why they have words like *conundrum*.

So, suppose you don't go and apply for the refunds on the vouchers. Or cash in only the Browns voucher and take a vacation on British Airways someplace else. Get away. Relax. Plan your next life adventure. But would that be the end of it? If you decide on this course, you'd prefer not to hear from old Hanover or his lawyers again. Unless, of course, they insist on sending more money and free tickets with no strings attached. Ha ha.

It's been in the back of your mind all morning, and now the impulse rushes forward: just call him. A freckled face appears overhead and winks at you. ***What have you got to lose?*** Right. Your uncle requested that you not discuss this or open the second letter unless it was necessary. But he never said you couldn't try to contact him. Since he has sent the astonishing invitation and funds, even addressed you as his beloved, how could he possibly object to your calling to clear matters up?

You glance at your phone's recent call list and tap the number. "Good evening, Hanover Manor, Penelope Stratton speaking," intones a lovely voice that carries a trace of sadness. "To whom may I direct your call?"

You start to identify yourself, but an odd and scary thing happens: your mind goes blank—you can't remember your own name! "Hello," you stammer, "I'm—I'm calling for Lord Hanover. Is he—"

You are immediately placed on hold. A recording of light classical music plays underneath another clipped British female voice. "The butler has asked me to announce that he has completed his inspection of the premises and finds everything to his satisfaction at present. The day staff is therefore dismissed and may retire to quarters. In fifteen more minutes, the main gate of Hanover Manor will shut. Until then, the butler offers us this musical interlude of new selections by the young American composer Raemond Starr."

It seems like the phones and the manor PA are somehow integrated. But did she just say Raemond Starr? From the news? The song contest vision? This guy's popping up everywhere! The music comes up a bit in volume. The melody is incredibly lovely, longing, remorseful—until a crisp voice interrupts. "James Farnsworth, head butler and administrator, speaking."

"Hello, I'm—"

"I know who you are," he interrupts coldly.

"Well, I would like to speak with Arthur Hanover." A lengthy silence follows, broken only by the clearing of a throat.

Finally, Farnsworth says in a lower, softer tone, "I regret to inform you that Lord Hanover passed away in Switzerland three weeks ago. We only learned of this . . . and other estate matters today."

"But that's impossible," you tell him. "I just talked to him yesterday."

Farnsworth reverts to his earlier icy persona, saying, "I don't know who you talked to, but it wasn't His Lordship." You're speechless. "You'll no doubt be coming." Farnsworth's tone is sinister. You are still unable to speak. "Well, good night, then." He abruptly disconnects.

You're momentarily overcome by this news and place your head in your hands. *Dead for three weeks? Then who called me that night? A young male*

Storyteller immediately appears. *Lord Hanover called you. From the grave? Hardly.*

You collect your wits and google for news about Arthur Hanover's passing and receive confirmation at several sites—but it's so odd that you missed this yesterday.

Gosh, a long-lost uncle you never knew you had—now he's dead and gone. Long-lost and newly lost. You turn on TTV, wondering if they are already reporting on a mysterious heir to Lord Hanover's title and estate. Which would be you. Are you soon to be all over the tabloids? God, you hope not. But happily, none of the stories on the evening newscast, again anchored by Michael Jansen and Meredith Lane, are about Lord Hanover himself, but one airing now concerns the manor estate. The screen caption reads:

**ROAD WRECKERS WREAK HAVOC ON MOTHER NATURE AND  
MANOR**

Your interest piqued, you press 3DHolo to immerse yourself in the scene. Meredith, dressed in a stylish yellow suit, introduces the segment: “Mother Nature is in dire straits. The metal monsters are everywhere. So says Mildred Simmons, head housekeeper at Hanover Manor, who is crusading to preserve the natural beauty and tranquility of the tri-county area. According to Simmons, widow of legendary estate gardener and environmentalist George Simmons, country lanes in Nuttey, Witless, and Loonton are being savaged by sharply increasing numbers of cars and lorries. We now go live to the manor to speak with Mrs. Simmons and her comrade in arms, American chauffeur Savannah Reddy.”

Meredith's image collapses into a window as the main screen shows the housekeeper—rosy complexion, kind face, intelligent eyes, attractive, fifties—standing beside her teenage grandson Christopher Robin—bright-eyed and well put together—who you remember seeing pictured with Lord Hanover online, and Reddy—sassy, sexy, blonde—who you'd likely not soon forget. They are standing in a beautiful rose garden with large ivy- and flower-wrapped trellises throughout. You walk into the garden and stand behind them.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Simmons,” says Meredith from her window. “We understand you and fellow environmentalists are quite distraught over the marked increase in local traffic.”

“Oh, Meredith, they’re ruining absolutely everything. These great rolling beasts and their snotty drivers are smashing our beautiful roads and utterly destroying the peace. The birds are going deaf and starting to sing off-key, and there are mashed insects everywhere. It’s simply horrible.”

Michael replaces his coanchor in the window. The backdrop consists of photos of structures typical of Stonehenge, only smaller and fewer in number. A chyron labels it “Mini-Henge” as the newscaster picks up the story: “Simmons and her group cited the recently unearthed miniature Stonehenge near Hanover Manor as the major cause of the crush of visitors and caterers invading the area. Its presence has led to an increase in rubbish, unapproved druidic rites, and packs of wild ravening dogs, reportedly led by a particularly ill-humored, three-legged rottie named Crunch who wears a black patch over one eye. Mrs. Simmons, please tell us what effect this unearthing has had on the manor environs.”

“Definitely, mini-Stonehenge has brought in the lot of them. Every type of cultist imaginable. Just yesterday, Savannah here had a *dreadful* encounter.”

The camera brings the drop-dead gorgeous chauffeur into close-up, causing you to walk around to face her. “It’s true,” she says. “The rock worshippers, the butterfly charmers, the self-proclaimed village idiots riding backward atop donkeys—they all came. Seemed like an amped up Renaissance faire for crazies. One of them tried to swipe my bike.” Savannah’s expression turns resolute as she says, “If something’s not done, and soon, we may be forced to take matters into our own hands.” Simmons nods in strong agreement.

Michael replies, “And what should be inferred from your threat, Ms. Reddy?”

To everyone’s surprise, young Christopher steps forward to answer. “Lorry drivers who thrash our roads may one day find the roads themselves raging in reply,” he states with cool, calm matter-of-factness.

Adds Mildred, “Whereupon suddenly and mysteriously the roads are strewn with nails, screws, and other jagged objects. We’re serious. The

lorries must stop taking these illegal rat runs through our manor environs. Or else.”

You pump a clenched fist in solidarity—no one messes with your manor! Michael looks quite taken aback by Mildred Simmons’s ferocity.

Meredith reappears in the window. “Good afternoon, Master Christopher. We understand it was you, in fact, who first alerted your elders that the birds and the bees were in acute distress. Can you please tell us how you learnt of it?”

“Ma’am, some plants told me what the birds and the bees told them,” says the boy.

There is a protracted silence. Both anchors are clearly stunned. Mildred smiles proudly and pats her grandson on the back.

“That’s extraordinary! You *listen* to plants?” Meredith is flummoxed.

“Yes, ma’am. But I’m just learning how,” Christopher replies.

This causes Meredith to stammer, “How did—? Sorry, I’m simply at a loss for words here.”

The housekeeper speaks up, “When George was alive, he conversed with a broad variety of plants nearly every day. He’d begun instructing the lad just before he left us.”

Adds Christopher, “Grampy loved all plants earnestly. And they loved him—and shared their talents to the extent possible in each species. Some are brighter than others, as in the animal kingdom, as with us.” “Well said, lad, well said indeed,” Michael interjects.

Christopher nods in shy appreciation, then continues, stating it wasn’t just the plants who cherished the association. “Bees buzzed around him excitedly whilst he toiled in the gardens. Often, numerous birds gathered to sing.”

“Yes, we know,” says Meredith as she turns to directly face the camera. “Many of our viewers will certainly recall a most extraordinary sight captured at George Simmons’s funeral procession last year.” A video insert shows a flock of birds overhead as Simmons’s coffin is carried toward a funeral tent blackened by a swarm of immobile bees. “Not only the tent,” Meredith narrates, “but the coffin itself was likewise covered with the insects. As were myriad floral, mushroom, and cacti displays. Yet none of the mourners, inside or out, were disturbed. A most extraordinary sight!”

The scene switches back to the manor. “Young man, we’ve now got to go to advert,” Meredith says, wrapping up the segment. “But we certainly want you back to delve into this fascinating topic in much greater detail. Will you promise to return very soon?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As the newscast goes to commercial break, another middle-aged Storyteller appears. *The boy listens to plants. Soon, you might be hearing them too. Sadly, we cannot. Well, if they tell me something, can I tell you? Yes! You can serve as interpreter.*

There’s a lot to absorb here—mini-Henge, village idiots, raging roads, talking plants, mournful insects—but you can barely keep your eyes open.

You awaken still undecided but calm, rested, and clear in your thoughts. For the first time since receiving this momentous news, you eat a decent meal, and you think about your brief exchange with the butler. Naturally, the news of Lord Hanover’s recent death must have been shocking, but why was Farnsworth so rude—downright hostile, actually?

Of course—Farnsworth said he knew who you were, but likely he’s just found out, as you have, and is probably appalled to learn about a heretofore unknown heir, and a blood relation to boot. Then there’s your family. Do any of them know about the demise of Arthur Hanover, somebody’s son, somebody’s brother? Does anybody know you’ve been contacted? You wonder if a relative or designated family friend will call or come by. You reread his letter one last time and finally decide that you are “truly undecided” enough.

You rub your thumb over the contours of the burgundy wax seal impressed with Arthur Hanover’s signet ring, carefully break open the small blue envelope without tearing the paper, then momentarily close the flap, noting how the two halves almost perfectly realign themselves. You take a deep breath, reopen the envelope, and pull out several folded sheets of matching stationery. The first shock comes from seeing a typed sentence slowly materialize across the top of the first page: *This sentence will appear only if the envelope’s seal has been broken.* Slowly, you read from the beginning:

*My beloved child,*

*Throughout your life, I've had people observe you—your personality, your relationships, your deeds good and not so. There were also periodic background checks. I even saw you several times myself, though always at a distance. I remember well the time when . . .*

You frown as you read the succeeding paragraphs. Each summarizes, in a concise, dispassionate way, several of your accomplishments and failings and some details of your romantic relationships. Arthur Hanover concludes his letter with:

*For these various invasions of privacy, I most sincerely and deeply apologise. But since I intended to leave substantial wealth, property, and a title to you, I felt it imperative that you possess a certain degree of intelligence and creativity, character and fortitude. And as I've mentioned in previous correspondence, you impressed me greatly. I've grown to know and love you as if you were my very own child. I beg you, begin preparations for your journey as soon as you have read this.*

You put the letter aside feeling mildly resentful but somewhat amused. You think about that opening sentence, recalling an article online that made mention of new ink technologies and of microchips embedded in paper documents as being among the various patents Lord Hanover holds. Maybe

that's why his letters always flash at first, but for what purpose? "Any idea, Storyteller?" *For your eyes only, perhaps?*

Looking up, you spy a dignified-looking elderly male. You laugh it off, walk across the room, pick up your phone, and call British Airways.

Not having to deal with work makes taking off on a moment's notice much easier. You make sure your passport's current, reserve all your flights, and notify Browns of your late-afternoon arrival. With plenty of expense money, you splurge on new luggage and clothes, mainly tailored and formal items, considering the place you'll be walking into.

To casual acquaintances, you say this is a vacation you'd been planning. To family and close friends, you give assurance that everything is fine—you just feel like getting away. You smile, enjoying how this air of mystery may have caused you to go up a notch or two in the estimation of those who know you best. You feel no need to tell anyone that you've lost your job. One small flourish you've added to your travel plans is to fly to New York City a day early, shop and sightsee in Manhattan, and stay overnight at a fancy hotel.

Soon, you'll be jetting off to a new life, albeit a secret one. You congratulate yourself for acting completely normal, for not letting on to a single misgiving. Actually, you're amazed at how everything fell into place. The inner journey, though, has been slightly difficult. It's taken some time to get over the self-consciousness you feel whenever you recall your uncle's revelations. Sometimes you wish you'd never read that second letter.

Gradually you realize, though, that you already miss the guy. You could use someone wise and caring to talk this over with. Someone like Lord Arthur Reynold Hanover, your devoted uncle who'd known you all your life. Tonight, an old standard hums softly inside your head: "Someone to Watch Over Me," which causes several singsong voices to say in unison, *Indeed, we are the someones.*



