

Chapter 1

I had always known someone was there but had never seen or heard them. So it came as something of a surprise when sitting on a bench in the park late one autumn afternoon, watching the wind pluck multi-hued leaves from the trees, I caught sight of, or rather, felt a strong visual sense that someone was there. But no matter how hard I tried, I could not bring the apparition into focus. It might have been a 'him', but it could have been a 'she'. The visual disturbance occurred somewhere towards my right-hand side. The implication was that the left hemisphere of my stroke-scrambled brain had processed the vision.

Then the vision made a noise like water tumbling over stones in a mountain brook. It was more like babbling than anything intelligent. I tried to say something, but the words would not form coherently. Two months after hospitalisation, I had gained normal perambulation skills, but conversations, past the odd word or two, still eluded me. My mind never lost clarity. I just was unable to communicate for many weeks. Tricia, my wife of almost 20 years, never gave up on me and was still in the process of bullying me into practice periods several times a day after the twice-weekly speech therapy sessions with the therapist.

"She is still quite beautiful, you know", said the disembodied voice, coming from roughly where the vision shimmered, on my right-hand side. "Leave Tricia out of this", I managed to mutter angrily. Who or what was this thing that knew about my personal details?

"Sorry," was the returned rebuff. *"Just trying to make conversation."*

"Don't," I said. My thoughts were all over the place. Was this a false vision created by my stroke?

"No," Said the 'thing' out loud. *"I'm real enough. You'll just have to get used to me 'cos I'm not going anywhere anytime soon."*

The damn thing can hear my thoughts, I thought.

"Sure, I can. And a whole lot more. There's not much I can't do if I put my, or is it your, mind to it."

"Rubbish", I said. What in God's name was happening to me? I was beginning to get my life back together. Admittedly it was slow going at times, but I was getting there with Tricia's help.

"It's certainly not rubbish," he or it said. *"I am not a figment of your imagination. It's just that I can't prove it to you. Well, not yet, anyway. But it will come together. As I get stronger, you'll benefit from my assistance in all sorts of ways."*

I wouldn't say I liked the sound of that. The kids were grown up, living their own lives on the south side of London and even provided us with three grandchildren, who we got to see regularly. Without the pain of bringing up your children, these short get-togethers were quite magical. Tricia and I had come even closer together with no one else's needs to consider but our own.

"But I have no intention of interfering with your life. I'll just share some of it and enhance other parts of it."

"No!" I said. "I won't let you in to ruin what me and Tricia have." My mind was horrified by this unwanted intrusion. *"I won't be spoiling anything. I appreciate that this is a lot to take on board in one hit, so I'll leave you alone for a while."*

And the vision died away and with it, the voice.

At last, there was peace. I was a bit of a religious nut when I was young, but I knew what had transpired was not a spiritual experience. There was no enlightenment, only a sense of fear and of having been invaded.

Slowly the panic subsided, and I was back to enjoying the parkland scenery, the sights and sounds of children at play in the nearby adventure park, and the musical cadence of the nearby fountain. I finger combed my greying, wavy locks into a semblance of tidiness and couldn't resist straightening my lily white mustache with my pocket comb. Sure my hair was beginning to be thin at the very top of my crown but being almost six feet tall, few people noticed that.

After a half hour or so, with no further interruptions, I rose a little unsteadily to my feet. I was quite OK but I'd sat still for too long.

With every additional step, my memory reminded my legs to keep moving, one foot in front of the other and within ten or twelve paces, I was walking with hardly a limp. The walk home took no more than half an hour. Half an hour to cover half a mile! I was getting better day by day.

"Enjoy your walk, dear?" Tricia asked while I fumbled to hang my coat and hat on the hall stand.

"It's a gorgeous day, love," I responded. "A bit chilly if you sit around too long, but great if you keep moving and I managed to jog for almost thirty-five minutes today."

"Wow! That's some improvement on your last run." She unconsciously tucked behind her ear a strand of chestnut brown hair that had escaped her ponytail band "There's a cup of tea in the pot if you want."

"I'll join you in a moment. I just need to visit the loo to make some room for it. The cold must've got to my kidneys."

"Just a sign of getting older, dear." Then she added, "It looks like our lives might have changed forever."

"Don't be like that," I said.

"Like what?"

"You said our lives are all but over."

"No, I didn't. I said we are both getting older."

"I was certain you had said our lives are changed forever." Tricia looked aghast. Her mouth moved, but no words came out. She sat on a kitchen stool at the table, looking quite horrified.

"Are you alright, Trish?"

"Tom," she said. "I never said anything about our lives changing."

"There's nothing wrong with my hearing," I said, a bit peeved that she should doubt me.

"Tom, I swear on my mother's grave, I never said those words."

"But I heard you."

"Tom, that's what I thought in my head, but I never spoke those words out loud."

Now it was my turn to look stunned.

"I tried to tell you," the inner voice said.

"You never said anything about being able to hear other people's thoughts."

"Tom, who are you talking to? There's only me here."

I recovered my wits. What could I tell her without appearing to have lost the plot?

"I'm so sorry, dear. My mind is roaming everywhere, and I keep hearing voices."

"Sounds like you might have overdone it on your walk today. Are you sure you're OK?"

"Don't worry. I'm fine. I'm feeling better with every day that passes. It's just a case that my mind wanders about a bit. It must be the effect of neurons recovering their ability to function and renewing my brain's connections."

"That sounds promising, but it still doesn't explain how you heard what I was thinking."

"We were probably thinking along the same lines, Trish, and our thoughts overlapped momentarily."

"Possibly. Tom. And you're suddenly talking much more fluently. That's a great step forward but still a bit spooky."

"I'd better get to the loo before I have an accident. Let's have a cuppa and a biscuit when I come back."

As I closed the loo door, the voice reappeared. *"You must be more careful around Trish unless you want to spill the beans about your newfound skill."*

"I can't do that. It would be awful to realise that your partner could hear your every thought."

"And you'll have her even more worried if you keep talking to me out loud. I hear your every thought. You don't have to vocalise."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of that," I thought.

"You'll soon get used to it, with a bit more practice."

I washed and dried my hands and returned to the kitchen to enjoy a drink with my wife.

Trisha was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea in front of her. She had brewed a pot of tea and covered the pot with a multi coloured knitted cover to keep it hot. My plastic jug with a sipping straw was sitting on a saucer.

“Go on! You can do it.”

I reached into the kitchen cabinet and replaced the plastic jug with my favourite china mug, decorated vividly with a bright blue kingfisher perched on a branch above a stream. “Are you sure you’re ready for that?” Tricia asked warily.

“I’ve got to get back to normality, dear, as soon as possible. Nothing tastes the same sipped through a plastic straw.”

“Let me pour for you,” she offered, reaching for the pot.

“Let’s see how it goes,” I responded.

The weight of the teapot in my hand surprised me, and it took quite an effort to hold it steady. I gripped the handle tightly to prevent it from wobbling. I poured confidently and didn’t spill a drop. Tricia raised an eyebrow in mild surprise, and I smiled as I returned the pot to its stand. But when I picked up the milk jug, my nervousness was transmitted to the liquid as concentric ripples on the surface.

“My, my,” Tricia cooed. “Aren’t you improving? Have you been practising?”

“See. When you trust me, you can do more things.”

“I’ve only poured a cup of tea.”

“And that’s the first time you’ve done that for months.” Tricia trilled with pleasure.

“Just keep believing in me. I told you we are capable of doing great things – together.”

Chapter 2

It was difficult restraining my thoughts and by supper time I was wearing earphones listening to my collection of pre-war jazz classics. The music reduced the risk of hearing Tricia's cogitations. I had tried to switch off earlier but her thoughts, mostly about my increased mobility and stability had still broken through.

"You'll get there," came the unbidden voice in my head.

"I'd get there a lot faster if you would leave me in peace for a while."

The surprise was that it (me?) stayed quiescent until almost eleven o'clock, which had previously been my regular time to turn in.

"My. My." Tricia raised an eyebrow. "There must be something in the water. You've not stayed up this late for an age. You must be feeling better. Or has your music reinvigorated you?"

"It's a long time since I've listened to those tracks, Tricia. But it's not the music. Something has changed in me today and I feel much more energetic."

"Whatever it is I am delighted, Tom. It's as if you've stepped forward three months in your expected recovery." She rose from her matching recliner on the opposite side of the gas fire. "Shall I turn it off or just down a bit?"

"Off, please. I'm ready now. It's almost a year since we went to bed together." I rose and held out my arms to her.

"Oh I do hope this isn't too early to resume our loving."

She came to me, and we stood kissing in a tight embrace. I wanted nothing more than to put her mind at rest. "Relax, dearest. I'm not ready for that, yet."

Her relief was obvious as she relaxed in my arms and I was able to hold her weight. *"Please don't think I don't want you, my love. I just don't want you to relapse,"* she sighed, gratefully.

"I'll let you know when I believe my strength has recovered sufficiently. I know you don't want me to overexert myself, yet."

"I can hardly wait, Tom. I miss you so much."

"Let's give it a few more days," I said. "I can hardly wait."

Tricia looked at me quizzically. *"You'd think he was reading my mind."*

"I am feeling better and stronger with every passing day. It may come sooner than you think."

"We'll know when it's the right time."

"You won't be able to hold me back when I feel we've reached that day."

"Steady on, tiger," she giggled, slid under the sheets, and reached into her bedside drawer for one of Danielle Steel's many romance books. "Aren't you reading tonight?"

"Hadn't planned to," I responded. "But I may change my mind if I can see anything exciting on the shelf."

"There's a new Jack Reacher book came in the post yesterday."

"Got it. Thanks dear. That's just what I need. Something to take my mind to a different horizon."

"Don't go too far."

"There's no fear of that. I don't plan on straying far from your side."

After reading no more than half a page I could feel myself nodding, to the point where my eyes were closed but my brain continued to read a story; not the written story, but some other story that it was making up as it went along.

"Tom, put the book down, your eyes are closed."

I felt her take the book from my hands, and little more, as my mind blanked out.

I concentrated my mind on Tricia. I did not know in which direction I should project my thoughts, or even if thoughts could be project4d an a particular direction, so I simply poured all the energy I possessed into sending her a message. “Don’t be afraid, my dearest. I will get to your side tomorrow afternoon, without fail. We’ll be back home in time for afternoon tea, just like we’ve been doing these last few months. Be brave dearest. It won’t be for much longer.”

The tears were unstoppable. I was totally empty.

“And when you’ve stopped feeling sorry for yourself you have to save your energy for tomorrow’s work. Be confident. We can do whatever it takes to save Tricia.”

“This is going to be rough. Sleep will be impossible. There’s no point in going to bed.”

“My suggestion is that you should follow your usual routine as far as you can and when you go to bed just lie down and close your eyes. Then count backwards from one hundred and I will make sure you’re in the land of nod within a minute or so.”