

**A MATTER
of
TIME**

PROLOGUE

THE LOST PATROL

December 5th, 1945. 5.22pm local time.

“When the first man gets down to ten gallons of gas, we’ll all land in the water together. Does everyone understand that?”

Mancuzzo listened as the words crackled in his headset. The anger rose in his throat. Goddamned officers!

“Dammit, if we’d just flown west we’d have got home!”

“Fox Tare Four Zero! This is Fox Tare Two Eight. I say again, when the first plane runs out of fuel, we all go down together. You know the drill, Four Zero. We’ve got to keep the flight together.”

“Acknowledge that, Mancuzzo!” shouted Eisner from the pilot’s seat in front of him. Bobby Eisner was hardly twenty, a kid still wet behind the ears. Yet even he was willing to kill them all just because Taylor had ordered him to.

Mancuzzo twisted in the cramped compartment and squinted out into the night. The driving rain streaked in horizontal stripes on the Perspex. Far below them in the darkness, the waves would be churned into froth by the force of the wind. It was suicide to try and ditch a flight of ten-ton torpedo bombers into it. Even if the five Avengers didn’t break up when they hit the water, there was no way any of them would survive in that sea, in that storm.

Mancuzzo stared at his own reflection on the Perspex and cursed his luck. Why the hell had he and Ronnie volunteered for flight school anyway?

To get out of combat. That’s why!

A MATTER OF TIME

Suddenly, he was back in the nightmare of Tarawa atoll. It had been the officers who'd made the mistakes there too . . .

They'd been told it would be a simple beach-landing against a small force of Japanese and Koreans, who were supposed to have been blown to hell by the shells from the big navy guns, or smashed to pieces by the air-force. Except that the navy shells had ricocheted off the Japanese gun emplacements like stones on a pond, and the planes hadn't flown because of bad weather.

"Mancuzzo! Acknowledge that order!"

Mancuzzo jerked back into the present. He should have known, during the briefing back in Fort Lauderdale, that it would end like this and cried off sick, like that guy Kosner from Lieutenant Gerber's plane. The flight instructor leading the mission, a new lieutenant called Taylor who'd just transferred in and didn't know the shoals and islands, had arrived late and then asked for someone else to take command.

But there was nobody else to take the flight.

Mistake number one!

At ten past two, they'd roared up off the tarmac and headed out over the Atlantic, bombed the hulk of an old cement boat, that was their first target, and turned north--up over Grand Bahama Island--to the next turn that should have taken them back to base in a great sweeping triangle.

Then, mistake number two!

Taylor's compasses went crazy. He handed the lead position over to Captain Powers' plane, but then wouldn't follow Powers' directions. He was convinced he knew better.

And, before anyone realised it, the weather closed in and they were lost . . . out there over millions and millions of square miles of sea.

If only they'd flown west when they first got lost they'd be back in Fort Lauderdale by now, stuffing their faces back at base. But now it was too late, and Mancuzzo was trapped in the darkness with the rest of them, at 3,500 feet over the ocean, running out of gas, while the goddamned officers argued over the radio. There was no way he was going to put his life on the line for them. Not again. Not after Tarawa . . .

When his platoon approached the beach, it was as if they had tried to attack a fully-armed battleship from a rubber boat. Those that hadn't been blown out of

A MATTER OF TIME

the water by the Japanese artillery were mown down by the hidden machine-guns as they tried to struggle out of the water. And those that survived that—those very few like himself and Ronnie Davis—were still alive when night fell, and the Japanese came out of the darkness. . .

Mancuzzo switched to an internal channel.

“We can’t survive in that sea. You know it, and I know it.”

“Just acknowledge the flight instructor’s order, Mancuzzo. I’m taking us down with the others.”

Mancuzzo’s big steelworker’s fist gripped the microphone so hard that it threatened to shatter. Bobby Eisner was just a kid. He’d seen him out around the base at Fort Lauderdale—goofing around with model airplanes and talking to the mechanics about engine design like he was Howard Hughes and Charles Lindbergh all rolled into one—just a kid who thought he could fly! Not a combat veteran like himself who’d watched his friends bleed their lives into the sand, or tried to stop their guts falling out with their fingers.

“There are three of us on this plane! And I say we turn west and fly home!”

“Can it, Mancuzzo! I’m in command here! Acknowledge the order!”

Taylor’s voice sounded in Mancuzzo’s headset from the leading aircraft.

“This is Fox Tare Two Eight to all planes. Bossi and Gerber are both down to ten gallons. I want you to follow me down and we’ll all ditch. You know the drill.”

Mancuzzo heard the other three planes in the flight confirm the order. He heard the fear in their voices.

Taylor’s voice again. “Fox Tare Four Zero! Do you read me?”

“Answer him, Mancuzzo!”

Mancuzzo switched back to the main channel, and pressed the “send” button on his microphone. “Fox Tare Two Eight, this is Fox Tare Four Zero. We still have gas and we’re flying on.”

Eisner twisted round in his seat.

“Mancuzzo! What the hell are you doing?”

“Just turn west and keep flying!”

Then Taylor’s voice. “Fox Tare Four Zero. You will follow me down with the rest. That is an *order*, mister! Do you hear me? We have to keep this flight together or we’ll all . . .”

A MATTER OF TIME

Eisner tried to look back past the bullet-proof shielding. “Mancuzzo! Acknowledge that order!”

“Just keep flying, Bobby!”

Mancuzzo saw the green, white and red navigation lights of the other planes around them, sliding down out of sight.

“Don’t do it, Bobby!”

But Eisner was going to do this thing by the book. Mancuzzo felt the nose of the Avenger dip and heard the engine noise deepen as Eisner throttled back to follow the rest of the flight down.

“Bobby! I’m warning you!”

Mancuzzo’s hand clawed at his seat-belt harness and ripped the emergency flare-gun out of its clip. In one vicious jerk he’d cocked the pistol and bent forward, stuffing the thick barrel of the gun through the narrow gap between the armour plating and the side of the cockpit in front of him, into Eisner’s right armpit. The Avenger yawed sickeningly in the sky. Davis the rear gunner called out. “What the hell’s happening?”

“Hang on in there, Ronnie. I’ll take care of you son, just like I did on Tarawa!”

“Mancuzzo . . . If you shoot me . . . we’ll *all* die!”

Mancuzzo ground the barrel of the pistol into Eisner’s back. “Listen, Bobby!” he shouted above the roar of the engine. “You’re too young to know what it’s like to have some officer throw your life away for nothing, but Ronnie and me have been screwed by you guys before. If I have to die this time, I’m gonna take you with me. So pull back on that stick and give us a bit more throttle, there’s a good boy.”

“I . . .”

“Do it, Bobby. Or I’ll put a slug of burning magnesium in your gut!”

Mancuzzo watched as Eisner’s left hand went for the throttle and heard the engine noise rise an octave. The nose of the Avenger steadied and lifted. On either side of them, the lights of the other aircraft slid down . . . into the void.

“Good boy. Now turn us back west.”

Mancuzzo heard Taylor calling to them, and then to the other three planes, over the radio. Gradually the voices got fainter and fainter and then . . . all at

A MATTER OF TIME

once . . . they fell silent. There was nobody left except himself, Ronnie Davis, and Bobby Eisner flying alone in the darkness.

“This . . . this’ll mean a court martial when we get back to Fort Lauderdale,” shouted Eisner.

“*If we get back.*”

Mancuzzo stared out into the darkness, at the huge thunderclouds, rising like mountains on either side of them . . . three, four, five thousand feet into the air. In the distance, he saw dim flashes of lightning, deep within the cloud base, sending sheets of cold fire across the sky.

“If we keep heading west we’ll fly right into it,” shouted Eisner.

“I don’t care. We don’t have enough fuel to go around.”

The clouds were getting closer, great brooding sculptures of supernatural power that towered up on either side of the plane.

Behind him, in the ball turret, Ronnie Davis was getting frightened.

“What about the radio?”

Mancuzzo lifted the microphone and tried again.

“This is Fox Tare Four Zero to all stations! Can anyone hear me? Over?”

“Mancuzzo. We *have* to fly around this. If we get struck by lightning . . .”

“Just keep flying Bobby. It’s what you’re good at!”

The flashes were longer and brighter, lighting up the towering skylscapes of cloud around them. Mancuzzo heard the rumble of thunder above the roar of the engine and the rush of the wind. He reached down and re-fastened his seat belt.

“Shit!”

“Mancuzzo! Davis! Look at that!”

Eisner pointed through the windscreen to where the lightning flashed across the cloud base ahead of them. The light was different somehow . . . like a real fire . . . like something *alive*. After the thrill of being in control again, Mancuzzo was suddenly afraid. “What the hell . . .?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” shouted Eisner. The fire was brighter now. It seemed to draw the clouds towards it like a magnet, growing, spreading, reaching out towards them . . .

“Fox Tare Four Zero, this is . . .”

Then the lightning hit . . .

A MATTER OF TIME

The aircraft shook as if it had been hit by a giant hammer. Davis screamed and Eisner's head jerked from side to side as he fought the controls . . . fought to keep them alive. The Avenger slewed to the right, stood on its wingtip for a moment, and then they were falling . . . screaming down out of the dark sky towards the ocean at over two hundred miles an hour.

"Come on . . . Bobby!"

And suddenly Mancuzzo was right back where he didn't want to be—with his life in the hands of an officer . . .

He knew Eisner was good. Anyone with Bobby's scores in flight school had to be good. But this was for *real*.

"Come on, Bobby!"

He was shouting . . . screaming at the top of his voice. He felt himself pushed back into his seat by the force of the dive. He heard Davis scream again . . . and then . . .

They were zooming up into the sky from the churning white ocean, back towards the heavens, and safety. Mancuzzo stretched up to look out at the night. They had lost a couple of thousand feet and were flying below the cloud base, in clear air. The rain streaked the windshield, making it hard to see. But at least they were still airborne.

"Where are we?"

Eisner sounded shaken, but excited. Like a kid who's just made his first dive into a swimming pool.

"I don't know. The compass is out again."

They were in limbo . . . lost . . . alone in the darkness.

And then . . .

In the centre of the windscreen, dead ahead, Mancuzzo saw a dancing point of light. Was it a ship, another airplane, or a reflection from the controls? Bobby Eisner shielded the instrument panel with his hand. The light remained, fixed in space. This was real. There was something out there!

"Can you see that, Mancuzzo?"

"I can see it. But what the hell is it?"

"It's very bright. Could be a lighthouse, or a beacon of some kind."

"At that height? It's way too far off the ground."

"It's just sitting there!"

A MATTER OF TIME

“It must be one of the rescue planes from Banana River air base, looking for us.”

“That’s not it, Mancuzzo. It’s not moving. There’s no rescue plane that can do that.”

“What?” yelled Davis from the ball turret. “What’s going on?”

“We have an unidentified bogie . . . a ‘Foo Fighter’ of some kind . . . dead ahead,” stammered Eisner. “It’s not a plane . . . I don’t know what it is.”

Mancuzzo squinted through the rain. “It’s just floating . . . like a balloon. How the hell can it do that in this wind?”

They were getting closer, and they could make it out. The thing was like a searchlight, motionless in space, shining down. What was it pointing at? Mancuzzo couldn’t see over the nose of the plane.

“Don’t get too close, Bobby!”

But it was too late. The thing seemed to spin on its axis and all at once the cockpit of the Avenger was flooded with brilliant white light.

“Oh my God . . .”

1

SPIDERS

London – January, Present Day.

Arthur Briggs turned the key in the lock of the big steel box and lifted out the heavy Smith and Wesson revolver, flipped the cylinder to one side and carefully threaded six brass cartridges into the chambers. Then he slipped the gun into the leather holster around his waist, clipped the strap down over the butt, and looked around the faces of the younger men standing in front of his desk in the night security room.

They were a good bunch. The best he'd ever had, and he took pride in them. Dave, the big Jamaican who'd handed him the cartridges from the safe, had been in the Parachute Regiment. Andy, the thin one who looked like a gangster, was ex-SAS and Terry, who looked as if he'd had his face rearranged with a trowel, was an ex-copper like himself.

"Don't we have to call the police if we take the gun out?" said Jimmy. He was new to Briggs's team, and the only one who didn't look like a security guard. Jimmy was thin and wiry, with a wispy blond beard and little silver granny glasses. If it ever came to any rough stuff, Jimmy wouldn't be able to cut it at all. But then again, that wasn't why he'd been hired. Jimmy's genius lay in the dozens of electronic sensors, cameras, and motion detectors, linked by miles of wiring that snaked all over the Gilcrest Radio Corporation's London headquarters, protecting it like a fortress. It was Jimmy's job to stop the rough stuff ever happening. But if it did, then Arthur Briggs and his "lads" would sort that out, no bother. That was where *their* genius lay.

"Now don't you worry about that, Jimmy my son," Briggs said, snapping the metal box shut. "Her Majesty's Metropolitan Police have got better things to do with their time than chase after false alarms in our boardroom. It was probably just a mouse farting anyway."

They all laughed. Arthur Briggs was good at handling people, particularly rough, hard people doing a rough, hard job.

He had been born in the East End of London, a few streets away from Vallance Road, home of the notorious Kray twins, whose speciality had been to use a cutlass on anyone who stood up to them. His father had been a respected London policeman—a "bobby" of the old school armed with nothing but a wooden truncheon—who had been gunned down in a bank robbery. Arthur had signed himself up for the force as soon as he was old enough, and in a couple of years had become the youngest sergeant in London, decorated by the Queen for bravery against a gang of thugs armed with broken bottles. It was no surprise that he came to the attention of the legendary Inspector "Nipper" Read and found himself on the squad that finally nailed the Krays.

"Weren't you afraid?" the newspapers asked him, as he'd stood next to Read outside the old Bailey on the day the twins were sentenced. "Did Ronnie ever come at you with his sword?" But

A MATTER OF TIME

Briggs had never been afraid of anything, except what might have happened to his wife Sandra if the Krays had ever taken it into their heads to go after her.

And, of course—spiders.

If there was one thing in the world that gave Arthur Briggs the screaming heebie-jeebies, it was spiders. He'd had to get Sandra to wash them out of the bath for him, back at home.

But all that was in the past. Briggs had retired from the police, Sandra's heart had finally given up the ghost, and all "Sergeant" Briggs had left to keep him company were his "lads". Good lads they were too, even Jimmy, who really *could* have told you if a mouse had broken wind in any one of the three hundred odd rooms in the building.

Which made is all very strange, thought Sergeant Briggs, as the lift neared the seventh floor. Either it *was* a false alarm, or they were up against some very professional villains—which was why he had gone through the ritual of unlocking the pistol and bringing it with him. There was no way he was going to die like his father, for want of gun of his own.

The lift doors slid open at the executive suite and out they stepped, five men—armed with their fists, truncheons, and Briggs's good old-fashioned Smith and Wesson—ready to take on the Krays themselves if need be.

Briggs stopped for a moment and looked down the corridor, taking in the scene. The smell of power and money oozed out of the polished wood, the thick piled carpet and the original oil paintings on the wall. Things "happened" here—important things—things that changed the lives of people like Arthur Briggs, and his lads.

"Andy, Dave, Terry," he said softly. "You guard that boardroom door. Don't move until I say so. Jimmy, you check out that console. See if there's anyone in there now."

Jimmy moved behind the receptionist's desk, slipped in front of the computer and pulled the screen round to face him. Briggs watched Jimmy's hands play over the keys, tapping out passwords and commands. In seconds there was a schematic of the whole floor up on the display. Jimmy beckoned him over to look at it.

"There," he said, pointing to the one flashing red square on the otherwise green map. "The motion detector in the boardroom's been triggered."

"But nothing else?"

"No. Nothing."

"So it's a false alarm, like I said?"

"Yeah . . . probably . . ." mumbled Jimmy.

"*Probably?* How *could* it be anything else?"

Jimmy shrugged. "All right, it couldn't be. For that to be a real break-in, whoever did it would've had to either get past all our internal systems, or shin up the outside of the building. Even then, they would have activated the window alarms and the closed-circuit TV cameras."

"So unless we're dealing with a computer genius who's also a human fly, that's probably a false alarm?"

"Probably."

"Good enough for me," said Arthur Briggs. "Dave, open that door, check it out and let's get back to work."

Dave's big hand closed over the door-knob, twisted it, and pushed.

The heavy wooden door hissed open on the carpet and Dave flicked on the light. They were staring down the polished surface of the boardroom table towards the panoramic picture windows overlooking the Thames. Even at this time of night, London was a sea of lights, moving and alive. Briggs stepped inside and looked around the room. There was the vast, glass-topped desk where the

A MATTER OF TIME

chief executive worked, and the big plasma screen that linked her and the directors to offices all over the world.

And, of course, the great mahogany board table itself, smooth and flawless, except for . . .

“Who the hell put *that* there?” Jimmy said.

He was staring at a beautifully crafted sword that seemed to grow out of the wood in the very centre of the table. The short steel blade glinted with a perfect mirror finish and, between the binding on the hilt was an engraved scene of tigers, topped by the most delicate cherry blossom. He reached forward to take it . . .

“Don’t touch it!” snapped Briggs, letting his own tension show for the first time. “It’s OK.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we know what it is, that’s all. You’re new. You wouldn’t have seen it.”

“So what is it then?”

“That sword,” said Briggs, settling himself into the chairman’s seat at the head of the boardroom. “Is what you call a ‘whacky-zahshy’. It was hammered into that table by none other than our chairman, Doctor Theodore Gilkrensky himself, after he’d beaten the shit out of the Japs, won back control of this corporation and thrown them off the board of directors.”

“But where does the sword come in?”

Arthur Briggs leant back in the seat and linked his hands behind his head.

“It belonged to a young Japanese bird who had a vendetta going with the chairman and our chief executive, the lovely Miss Jessica Wright, over the death of her parents back in Japan. She even killed the chairman’s wife for revenge, so they say, but he got the better of her in the end.”

“Is she dead?”

“Blowed if I know. Last I heard she was locked up in some hospital in Tokyo.”

Andy was peering through an open door near the big glass-topped desk. “Hello, hello, hello,” he said with a smirk. “What’s all this then?”

It was an executive bedroom, fully equipped with a dressing-table, an en-suite bathroom and a generous single bed that, at a pinch, could accommodate two.

“That, my dear Andrew, is also part of the story,” explained Briggs. “Rumour has it that Miss Wright’s former deputy, one Mister Tony Delgado by name, not only wormed his way into her bedroom but also tried to run off with the chairman’s new supercomputer into the bargain. I’d have had him strung up by the balls, if it was me. But Dr Gilkrensky just told me to throw him out of the building on his ear. ‘Don’t let him back in . . . whatever happens!’ he told me. Funny that. Still, I suppose he knew what he was doing . . .”

“I still can’t figure out why the motion sensor went off on its own,” Jimmy said. He had taken the inspection cover off the wall mounted unit and was testing it with a palmtop computer. “It’s working perfectly now.”

“Probably a mouse farting, like I said,” said Arthur Briggs and got to his feet. “You just keep at it. I’m going for a piss.”

He smiled at Andy as he walked past him, shut the door of the bedroom for privacy and ambled over to the en-suite bathroom, glancing enviously at the bed on the way. That would have been where Jessica Wright and Tony Delgado had “unwound” on those evenings when he and his lads had been under strict instructions not to disturb them. A fine piece of woman she was too, thought Briggs, legs up to her armpits, and a lovely head of dark chestnut hair, just like Sandra’s had been when he’d first met her. He ran his eyes over the expensive toiletries above the sink in the bathroom . . . scents, lotions, women’s things.

A MATTER OF TIME

Briggs lifted the seat of the lavatory, anxious to leave no trace that he'd trespassed in this secret sanctum, unzipped his trousers, and pointed himself at the bowl. He relaxed as the golden stream bubbled and gurgled. What a relief!

And then, there was a noise . . .

It was just like the time he'd heard Sandra fall, after that last heart attack. There was the same awful finality about it, the same total letting go of life as a body fell to the floor . . . and lay still.

Arthur Briggs zipped himself up quickly, pushed open the bathroom door into the bedroom . . . and froze . . .

Another sound . . . the sound of something living hitting a solid, unyielding surface, and not living any more. Then finally, the unmistakable hiss of a sharp, sharp blade cutting through flesh . . . like scissors through cloth . . . or Ronnie Kray's cutlass . . .

There was a gurgling, dying gasp.

And then silence.

"Andy! Dave! Terry! What's going on?"

Beneath the bottom of the door to the boardroom a glistening stain was seeping through the strands of thick piled carpet, further . . . and further . . . and further. It looked for all the world like dark red wine but Arthur Briggs, a veteran of a thousand crime-scenes, knew exactly what it was.

It was new blood, fresh on the boardroom floor, on the other side of that doorway . . .

Briggs hauled his personal VHF radio out of its pouch and pressed the "talk" button. "Hello control! This is GRC Security at London Bridge. I have an emergency and possibly four men down. The intruders are armed. I repeat, arme d! Can you hear me? Over?"

He heard nothing but the hiss of static.

And the silence from behind the door.

He tried again. Still nothing.

Christ! It should work! What the hell was wrong with it. Was it being jammed? Who the hell am I up against here?

He threw the useless radio onto the bed, popped the strap on his holster and hauled out the big Smith and Wesson. He felt the weight of it in his hand. The courage of his old days against the Krays, when he was afraid of nothing but spiders, rose in his voice as he shouted, "Do you hear me out there? I'm a trained police officer, and I'm armed. Stand away from the door and put down your weapons or I'll shoot. Is that understood?"

He listened.

Silence.

And then, from the other side of the door, he heard a soft chuckle, like a child might make . . . or a woman . . .

It was so unexpected.

Curses, shouts, even a shot he could have managed. But this . . .

Briggs was suddenly afraid again.

He reached up and flicked off the light, plunging the windowless bedroom into blackness. As he crouched on the floor, he saw the dull strip of light from the boardroom, glowing beneath the closed door, and glistening on the blood.

Briggs pulled back the hammer of the pistol with his thumb, feeling the trigger cock. He reached up for the door-handle and, with painful slowness, eased it open. The strip of light grew and split along the frame.

Briggs peered through, into the boardroom . . .

A MATTER OF TIME

For a moment, he had trouble adjusting from the darkness to the light. He could make out the tangle of overturned chairs in the shadows, and the crumpled bodies around the table.

Above the carnage, like the surface of a dead sea, was the polished oak top of the boardroom table. In its centre was the lamp from Jessica Wright's desk, the only light in the room, carefully focused onto a deep, triangular gouge, where the beautiful short sword had been . . .

Briggs forced himself to look away, to protect his night vision. Nothing moved. Nothing he could see . . .

Then he rose to his full height, swung the big gun to cover the shadows, and reached inside the boardroom with his left hand to find the main light switch. His fingers inched across the panelling, touched the finger plate and . . .

A dull thump, like a hammer blow, smacked into the back of Briggs's outstretched hand. For a moment there was nothing but numbness. Then the most excruciating pain lanced up his arm. He tried to pull the arm back, but found it trapped. Sticking out of the back of his hand, impaling him against the panelled wall, was a metal spike.

"Jesus!"

Briggs blasted three shots across the boardroom, firing at any patch of darkness big enough to hide a man. He heard the slap of his bullets into the walls and felt the deafening boom of the gun ring around the room. In the muzzle flash he thought he saw something huge . . . something black and alien . . . slide across the wall. He fired again, but the thing was gone.

Had he killed it?

He fired twice more at the largest and darkest of the shadows. He was shaking, as the breath whooped in and out of his lungs and the pain lanced up his arm. The air was full of smoke, the smell of cordite . . . and death.

Dear God! What had done this?

He couldn't pull the spike out of his hand without putting down the gun. And he couldn't put down the gun for fear of what was out there in the shadows.

His eyes darted from the door to the window, from the ceiling to the floor, and back again . . . and again . . . and again.

Something moved, over by the window.

He saw it! He could kill it!

He raised the gun and pulled the trigger.

Click!

The hammer fell on an empty chamber.

Click!

The shadow slid towards him, soundlessly, effortlessly, remorselessly.

Click! Click! Click!

He flung the empty pistol at it, missed, and heard the plate-glass window shatter. Cold night air flooded the room. He heard the buzz of distant traffic and the rising wail of police sirens . . . in another world . . . his world . . . a whole galaxy away.

In front of him, he heard the dark, soft chuckle again. The shape was like a giant spider, crouching right there in front of him on the boardroom table.

He saw the gleam of light on exquisitely polished steel. The last thing Arthur Briggs ever heard was his own scream.