

A PRE-PUBLICATION LIMITED EDITION BOOKLET

TIME MACHINES

Repaired While-U-Wait



K. A. Bedford

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by
K. A. Bedford

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CHAPTER 1

“If it’s another dead cat,” said Aloysius “Spider” Webb, senior time machine technician, “you’re buying the next round. Deal?” Spider was driving the van, a big fuel cell-powered behemoth, with *TIME MACHINES REPAIRED WHILE-U-WAIT* on the side. In the shotgun seat was his coworker, mechanic Charlie Stuart, a young guy, very capable, lost inside a white lab coat at least a size too big for his scrawny frame.

“If it is another dead cat,” Charlie said, “I’ll eat my bloody lab coat.”

Spider shot him an amused glance. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Cats, mostly dead ones, had a way of turning up inside broken time machines. They were a pain in the ass. In fact, the last time some idiot had called Spider and Charlie out to look over a broken machine — yet another Tempo — it had turned out that a cat had gotten trapped in the unit’s engine compartment and died. The deceased cat’s bodily fluids had then leaked into the translation engine and complicated things needlessly. To say nothing of the stink. Spider remembered how the owner freaked out when he was told. “It’s not even my bloody cat!”

Today, Spider and Charlie had been called out to look over a twelve-year-old, second-hand Tempo 300 whose owner reported that it was “on the fritz” and “acting funny.” The Tempo was the world’s most popular time machine model, far outstripping its nearest rival, the more up-market Boron. The Tempus Corporation, headquartered in Nairobi, was pumping out Tempos at such a prodigious

rate that market experts were always predicting the end of the “time-travel bubble,” but so far demand remained high.

The owner of this Tempo, a certain Mr. Vincent, lived in a huge house on a tree-lined street in the vast northern reaches of the exurban metroplex that had swallowed the entire south-west of the state.

The house was not far from the coast, but not so close that he would have to worry about his expensive abode falling into the sea any time soon.

Spider pulled into Mr. Vincent’s sweeping driveway and parked behind an immense, black hydrogen-powered SUV.

Spider said, “Get the gear.”

“On it, boss.” Charlie got out and went around to the back of the van.

Spider shut down the van and climbed out. He took a moment to take in the sheer monstrosity of Mr. Vincent’s house and thought about what you could do with the amount of credit it must have taken to fund the damn thing. *You could do a lot*, he thought. *Buy your own artificial island, maybe.*

The entrance of the house swept open, and a tall, thin guy emerged. “Hey!” the man said cheerily, and made his way down the driveway to Spider and Charlie. “How’s it hangin’?”

He was younger than Spider, and wore fashionable camo shorts and a Bali tee-shirt that played gamelan music. Most worrying, though: both his eyes had been replaced by the eye-plugs favored by people working in the information business. They made Mr. Vincent look as if he had the eyes of a fly, all black, circular and studded with wireless transponders. It gave Spider a chill, but he adjusted his white lab coat and went up to the client.

“Mr. Vincent, I presume?”

“Geez,” Vincent said, grinning, flashing big teeth — which appeared to feature animated images — and pointing his eye-plugs at Spider. “You boys took your time getting out here, huh?” He laughed. Because, surely, time

machine technicians would turn up even before you called, right? Right? Spider and Charlie glanced at each other; Spider chewed his lip a moment. Charlie said he had to set up and check their gear, which left Spider to talk to Mr. Vincent, who appeared to have no awareness of how creepy he looked.

Mr. Vincent led Spider over to the time machine in question. This type of unit looked something like a helicopter, minus the tail boom and overhead rotors: it was all enclosed cockpit with an engine compartment on the back. It rested on a carbon-fiber trailer, parked on the other side of the SUV. Vincent made nervous small talk of the sort that Spider hated. When he asked what footy team Spider supported, Spider said, "None of them."

Mr. Vincent said, "Uh, okay, um," and moved on to the Tempo. Spider asked him if it was true that Mr. Vincent had bought the unit second-hand, from a classified ad.

"Yeah, found it in a want-ad. Going for a bloody steal, too. God, it would've been a crime not to buy it, you know?" He laughed again, and Spider once more had to look at the guy's disturbing face. He shuddered discreetly.

"Hmm, okay," Spider said, looking the unit over, "when you bought the unit, did you ask — or did the vendor provide — any documentation for it?"

"Um, what kind of documentation?"

Spider felt his blood pressure starting to rise, and he looked back at where Charlie was getting everything set up. His assistant was a good kid, didn't require much supervision, and knew time machines in a way Spider found a bit spooky. Spider turned back to Mr. Vincent. "Yeah, documentation. You know, service manuals, travel logs, warranty papers, evidence that the vendor had actually bought the unit from an authorized reseller. Anything like that?"

Mr. Vincent shut his mouth and looked a little troubled. He stared up at the Tempo on its trailer, as if seeing it for the first time, and not liking what he saw. "Um, no, actually. None of that. S'pose there should've been something, huh?"

"So you bought a used time machine in a private sale with no support papers," Spider said.

"Not so bright, huh?" Mr. Vincent said, flashing a *God, I'm stupid* nervous grin.

"You have no way of knowing, for example, if the unit is stolen, do you?"

"Stolen?"

"Wouldn't be the first hot time machine that got sold like that, sir."

"The guy didn't look like a criminal," he said.

Spider said, "Okay, then," perhaps too brightly, "maybe I'll just have a first peek at the beast itself. How's that sound?"

As if grateful for the change of subject, Mr. Vincent grinned. "Yeah, okay. I've already unlocked it. Knock yourself out."

Spider nodded, climbed up on the trailer, and — tensing a little — pulled open the driver's side door. He took a cautious sniff. No dead cat smell. That was a relief. All the same, looking over the Tempo, it struck him that there was something about the unit that wasn't right. It was old, and looked it: the bodywork was dented, with some hull panels no longer fitting together as snugly as they had when the unit was still in the show room. It looked as if it had done a lot of jumps, but none of that bothered Spider. Staring at the thing, climbing around it, peering closely at it, he couldn't see exactly what the problem might be. There was just something odd about it, a weird vibe. It made him feel uncomfortable, just being near it, and that was puzzling. Already he was starting to dread having to fix the bloody thing.

Spider said to Mr. Vincent, "Before you gave the vendor any money did you at least, um, try it out to make sure it worked okay?"

"He offered, actually," he said, smiling. "Took me and my girlfriend for a spin. Yeah, it was great."

"So the unit did work correctly at that time?"

"Oh yeah. He took us back to — oh God, what was it? 1974? Something like that. Anyway, that part of town was still just wilderness back then. Scared some local birdlife, and the girlfriend got bitten by some kind of bug. God, was she pissed!"

Spider nodded, trying hard not to imagine how the picturesque moment must have played out. "Okay, so it's started acting up since you got it home, yes?"

"Yeah, you're not wrong."

Spider got back inside the unit, inspected the controls, and took another look around the cabin. *So far*, he thought, *so good. Just the usual faint waft of electricity and lost time.* Better, he was glad he did not find any evidence of Mr. Vincent and his girlfriend having ... but his thoughts were quickly supplanted by a creeping sense of wrongness. Even though it *looked* okay, more or less the way you'd expect a twelve-year-old, used time machine to look, with lots of custom mods and duct tape and epoxy, there was definitely something about it that made Spider want to get the hell away from it. He shivered, and climbed out onto the trailer, and from there he jumped down to the ground. Just stepping away from the thing made him feel better.

Vincent started telling Spider all about his exciting adventures in time and space. "It was bloody fantastic at first, you know? So cool, I mean, the first thing I did, the very first thing, I went back to when I was high school, right? I thought it'd be fun to hang out with my past self, and, you know, give me some advice about 'the ladies.'" The way he said "the ladies" creeped Spider out all over again.

"And let me guess," Spider said, "your former self either didn't believe you were really him, or he did but none of your advice made him change his ways, or he couldn't actually see or hear you?"

"Uh, yeah. That last one. It was kinda puzzling."

"Ghost mode, Mr. Vincent. It's a toggle switch on the control panel. I'm guessing you accidentally switched it on at some point."

"Yeah, okay, that makes sense, yeah. God, do I feel dense!"

Spider finished his inspection of the unit, and that creeping, something's-wrong feeling would not go away. Finally he turned to Mr. Vincent and said, "So when did it start acting up?"

"You probably get to hear a lot of stories about people doing dumb things with their time machines, huh?"

"One or two, Mr. Vincent, one or two. Now—"

"Right. Yeah. Um, to answer your question. Let me think. Yeah, it was last week sometime, Saturday? Yeah. Thought it'd be a hoot to take the girlfriend and go and see the *Titanic*, right? The actual ship?" He paused a moment, waiting for Spider to laugh or at least smile.

Spider stared at him, not interested in playing along. "And that was when the problem manifested, is that right?" To say nothing of the fact that a Tempo model like this one couldn't travel in space the way it could travel in time. Yes, idiot Mr. Vincent here could certainly go back to the date of the *Titanic's* departure from Southampton, but he would still be in this particular part of Western Australia, in fact stuck in the middle of what at the time was very nasty outback desert. He would have had to make his own way, using available transportation, to Southampton. Spider had heard of plenty of idiots who had tried something similar, arrived in the middle of the desert where moments ago exurbia had sprawled around them, and rather than cut their losses and come back to the welcome embrace of the modern world, they'd chosen to set out, on foot, in the desert, in search of someone with a truck who could give them a lift to the nearest big town. It was amazing how many of these idiots met very bad ends, baffling the police of those periods very much. The federal government's Department of Time and Space was threatening to mandate nationwide pilot training and licensing for time machine operators, which always met with enormous protests and opposition.

Charlie was finished preparing the gear. Spider asked him to take some preliminary readings and poke around a little. "Gotcha," Charlie said. He opened his toolbox and pulled out a wireless scanning device. He switched it on, loaded a suite of analytic software, hoisted himself up onto the trailer and set about climbing his way around the unit, taking readings, all the while swearing quietly to himself. After he finished the external inspection, he opened the driver's-side door and got inside.

Mr. Vincent was still talking, "Yeah, I'm sitting there in the driver's seat, right? And I punch in the date and the time and everything, and hit the go button, and, well, nothing. So I tried again, and still nothing. Must have tried like twenty times. Then I noticed, and you won't believe this, I noticed the TPS was on the blink—"

This got Spider's attention. "The Temporal Positioning System? On the blink how, exactly?"

"Look, it's easier if I just show you, okay?"

"Uh, no, sir. I am not setting foot inside that cabin again until my assistant tells me it's safe to do so."

"But it's—"

"You want to show me what happens, that's fine. But I'm not climbing into this unit until I know I'm not going to end up three hundred years in the future, okay?"

"What about your assistant?"

"He gets paid to do that. I get paid to talk to you."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really."

"Has that ever happened to you, though? Suddenly flung off into the far future by mistake while fixing one of these?"

Spider allowed a small smile. "Uh, no, not to me personally. Now then, we'll just see how Charlie's doing." Spider went around to the driver's side. "How's it look in there?"

Charlie opened the door, and the first thing Spider noticed was that Charlie was unusually pale, even for him. He said, "Something is *so* not right in here, boss."

"How do you mean?"

Mr. Vincent piped up, "Actually, that's one of the things I wanted to tell you about. If you sit in the cabin for any length of time, even with everything powered down—"

Charlie leaned out of the unit and sat there, taking deep breaths, feeling woozy. "Oh God," he said.

Spider helped Charlie down, took the scanner off him, and got him to go sit in the van. He asked Mr. Vincent to get Charlie a glass of water, and the guy hurried off. Spider leaned against the unit's trailer and scrolled back through Charlie's scans. The readings were strange: in many ways,

even though the unit was powered down, it was reading as if it was in fact powered up and ready to launch. And, yes, the Temporal Positioning System, which was supposed to tell you the unit's current location in its own timeline, and which should have given a straightforward reading of time since leaving the factory, was indeed on the blink. The numbers were a flickering whirl, a blur. The unit had no idea when the hell it was located; as far as it was concerned, it was lost in time.

Spider saw this, freaked out a little, and sprang away from the trailer, swearing under his breath. He stood there, hands on hips, staring up at the thing, feeling nervous in a way he never usually felt. He went and found Charlie, sitting sideways on his side of the van, the door open, his legs dangling outside. "Feeling any better, mate?"

He did look a little less pale. "Sort of, boss. It's just, I don't know, maybe a touch of food poisoning. Had some Chinese takeaway last night after work, and you know what that's like, bloody salmonella roulette..."

Spider nodded. "Look, if you want to take the rest of the day off—"

"No way. I'll be right. "

"You think maybe the unit made you sick?"

Charlie looked him in the eye. "Soon as I sat down in there, I started feeling clammy, but I ignored that and kept looking around, doing my thing, checking everything like you said. But after a bit I did start feeling really crappy, and I just figured it was last night's Chinese, but—"

"It's not just you, Charlie. Something's spooky wrong with that thing."

Mr. Vincent found them, and handed Charlie a glass of cold water. "There you go, straight from the tank to you. Fresh as," he said.

Charlie lifted the glass, said, "Cheers, mate," and took a long drink. "Oh, that's just magic. Thank you!"

"No worries. I'm just sorry you—"

Charlie waved off his concern. "Quite all right. Quite all right."

Spider looked at Mr. Vincent. "Have you ever felt sick inside the machine?"

"Well, yes, now you mention it. A couple of times. I never thought too much about it, and figured it was just, you know, food poisoning, right? Too much fast food, that kind of thing? I don't do much cooking here at home, and I'm always working late..." He was looking at his time machine now. "You think it made me sick?"

"Could be," Spider said. "It's not unheard-of, but it is rare."

"Not a good sign?" Mr. Vincent said.

"No. Not a good sign," Spider said.

"What's it mean, though?"

Spider scratched his chin. "Most likely thing is just that the unit is not fully here in this spot in space-time."

Mr. Vincent stared at Spider. "What?"

Spider left Charlie to rest while he took Mr. Vincent back to the unit. "Look here," he said, holding the scanner in front of the guy. "See this graph? The way that line curves way the hell up there like that?"

"Yeah, what does it mean?"

"The whole unit is powered down, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course it is. You could see that for yourself. Just look at it."

"I know. The unit looks powered down. This says it's powered up. Mr. Vincent, what you've got here is a bloody death trap. You're damn lucky you and your girlfriend weren't killed!"

"We could have been killed?"

"Or worse, yeah."

"What's worse than being killed?"

"Worse than being killed, sir, is being lost. As in nowhere, and nowhen, to be found, anywhere in any timeline"

Mr. Vincent thought Spider was kidding, so he smiled to go along with the gag. "Like that ever happens, yeah, right!"

Spider paused a moment, staring at Mr. Vincent's horrible bug-eyes, wondering which of the vast number of things he could say at this moment would prove most

effective in convincing this idiot that he had the luck of the truly stupid, and which would also be very satisfying to say to this fool in a loud voice. He waited for his heart rate to settle, and then said, "It would be tempting to tell you to drop your Tempo into one of those car compactors they have at the salvage yard, and turn the thing into a nice cube of dead matter — but, sadly, that wouldn't be safe. There could be so much energy still running through the unit that you would end up wiping out a large swath of the metroplex, and the local coppers would understandably take a dim view of that outcome."

"So what do I do with it?"

Spider couldn't believe he was about to say this. "Give it to me. I'll see what I can do. It might be fixable."

"You just said it might explode!"

"I didn't get my qualifications from a box of corn flakes, Mr. Vincent. There are things we can try that might help."

"And if not? What if you get killed?"

"You'll be among the first to know."

"Holy crap," he said, now starting to understand. "I could have killed my girlfriend."

"This is what you get for buying a used time machine off a classified ad, if you'll pardon me saying so. No warranty. No service contract. No protections of any kind. You've gone and bought yourself a bloody bomb!"

"Right," he said. "Right."

"I'll need the name and contact details of the guy you bought it from, too."

He stared at Spider, all anxious. "I'm not sure if I still have those. We did a big clean-out recently, going through all the accumulated crap on the household network, old bills, bank statements, receipts, business cards, share dividends, bits and pieces, you know, a real purge."

"You don't keep backups, just in case?"

"Not for stuff like that. Takes up too much space."

It baffled Spider that, in an age when computational storage capacity was nearly free and limitless, most people persisted in behaving as if it was terribly expensive and scarce. It was strange. He really didn't understand it.

"Hmm. Too much space. I see." Spider was feeling that, at this rate, he might have a stroke. "Look. Mr. Vincent, listen to me. We're going to take your Tempo back to the shop. We'll do what we can. Meanwhile, you are going to find out for me exactly who you bought this thing from. Odds are he's still selling them. Look on eBay, too. I can't tell you how many dud time machines get sold on eBay. Find the guy. When you do, give me his details. We'll have a chat. All right?"

"Okay. Right."

"Right. Now then..."

Mr. Vincent piped up. "Oh, wait a minute. Can you give me some kind of a quote for what all this might set me back? Just so I know."

Spider was tempted to give him a quote from something bleak by Shakespeare, but instead told the guy that just for openers he'd be looking at about one thousand dollars, and probably more.

"But I only paid two thousand for the thing itself."

"Sir," Spider said, "we're risking our lives by working on this death trap of yours. You have any idea what our public liability insurance is like? Huh? If it blows, and takes me, Charlie, and most of the rest of Malaga with it, the insurance company will come looking for you, Mr. Vincent. It's your choice."

"And if I just say forget about fixing it, I'll sell it on to someone else..."

"In that case I will personally report you to DOTAS. You could, and this is the funny part, you could do time. You see how that would be funny?" Spider wasn't smiling.

Mr. Vincent, not happy, beamed his details into Spider's watchtop.

Spider reciprocated, sending a repair quote, a receipt (1 x Time Machine, Tempo 300 - Non-Functioning), and a business card to Vincent's own watchtop.

That all done, Spider got the guy to move his SUV out of the way, so he and Charlie could hook the unit's trailer up to their van.

Ten minutes later, the trailer attached, Spider and Charlie took off back to the workshop, trailing what Spider was certain was a bloody great huge bomb that could go off at any moment.

Charlie, feeling a little better, though still uneasy about the unit behind them, said, "You know what you're doing, right?"

"Sure I do," Spider said, being careful to take the very long way back to Malaga, following obscure back roads wherever possible.

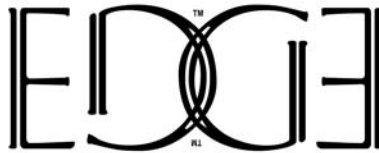
"And if it kills us?"

"If it kills us, we'll be dead, and we won't ever have to piss about with bloody time machines ever again, Charlie. It's practically the best outcome we could ask for, really, if you think about it." Spider hated time travel and time machines with a rare passion.

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Stick with me, kid, you'll do all right."

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K. A. Bedford

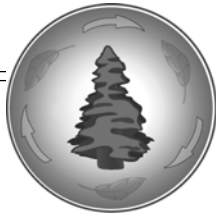
I was probably scribbling on the inside wall of the womb while Mum was pregnant with me. I don't recall. I do recall writing a very great deal pretty much from my first moment. For a long time, however, my writing resembled strange scratches and wiggles, and was generally considered somewhat obtuse and difficult. Then one day at school they started teaching us how to print, and a few years later actual cursive script. A few years after that, when I was about eight years old, I encountered a typewriter for the first time. I remember this now as practically a religious experience.

So while I was always writing some damned thing or another as a young tacker, I didn't get really serious about it until I was about fourteen, when I completed what I thought was my first "proper" short story. Many more terrible short stories followed. Then, starting at age eighteen, came a succession of ghastly novels about improbable characters, including the one with the hitman whose index finger is six feet long and weighs two hundred pounds by

itself. When I hit university in my early twenties, I got side-tracked over into theater, and wrote a bunch of horrible plays to go with all my ghastly books and terrible stories. It was all good fun, though. After university I got distracted by role-playing games, in the course of which I met Michelle, who would later be my wonderful wife. I have always loved board games, role-playing games, computer games, and still pursue that interest when I can. Writing eventually lured me back, or, more accurately, grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and frog-marched me to my writing desk and planted me in the chair and made me write Actual Proper Fiction. Thus was spawned yet more disastrous novels. Somewhere in there I also had a series of frightening jobs working for the Australian government in their public service, where I learned I was really not suited to office work.

Another fit of university life interrupted the bliss in the mid-90s, during which I attempted to learn philosophy by correspondence. It was exceedingly interesting, and I learned a great deal, including how I really don't know bugger all about anything. I also learned, after tackling the deathless prose of the Philosophy Essay, that I much preferred writing ghastly books. Fortunately, in the middle of this course, one of these ghastly books actually got bought by these nice Canadian people, who clearly had no idea about my long-standing reputation as a purveyor of ghastly books. I suspect it would be best not to tell them about this in correspondence. We'll just go along with the fiction that *Orbital Burn* is my "first novel," and say nothing more about it.

I take my writing very seriously indeed, which is a relatively recent development. I see myself as a journeyman apprentice sort of writer, more craftsman than artist, and I expect to continue learning my craft for the rest of my life. Writing continues to be a struggle for me, in more ways than one, and I see that as a good thing. I have instructed my wife that if I ever pronounce that I have mastered writing, she is to hit me hard with a squid. I now live in fear of the squid.



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