**On New Year’s Eve**

“Where are we, Doctor?” Barbara Wright asked as the tiny rotor came to a standstill and the radiation monitor stayed steadily in the safe zone.”

“We… appear to be in London,” The Doctor answered.

“Really?” Ian Chesterton did a magnificent impression of a dog with its ears pricked up and nose pointing in the direction of a rabbit. “Oh, wait, I suppose it could still be London in 1901 or the year 2222. Our London could still be a long way off.”

“You mean a London where you could leave us?” Susan queried with a deep sigh. “Go back to your own lives, as if nothing had happened.”

“Not exactly,” Barbara admitted. “I don’t know how I will ever just teach history o’level again after living in the Crusades, the French Revolution, the last days of the Aztecs….”

She shuddered at her remembrance of the Terror and their too close brush with Madame Guillotine, but the other two encounters with history, while also dark and dangerous, had brought her in contact with kind and honourable people she had gladly counted as friends.

Yes, knowing The Doctor and Susan, and sharing their nomadic journey through time and space had been enlightening.

But all the same, she and Ian thought longingly of going back to their normal life and keeping this memory of these times as a precious secret between them.

“I’m afraid we can’t stay here,” The Doctor said. “It would be far too dangerous.”

“Why?” Barbara asked. “It’s not the war… the Blitz, is it?”

“No,” The Doctor explained. “It’s New Year’s Eve, 1962. The Eve of 1963.”

“So… it is our time… more or less?” Ian queried.

“Then why is it dangerous?” Barbara insisted.

“Because it is before we left Earth,” The Doctor explained. “We are ALL still living in London right now. There are two of all of us within a few miles radius. Two of me, two of Susan, two of you and Ian. Even more dangerously, there are two of the TARDIS – the same TARDIS. It is very dangerous.”

“I don’t understand,” Barbara admitted. “Why is that dangerous?”

“The Blinovitch Uncertainty Principle,” Susan answered with a deep sigh of a student recalling a dull lesson. “It’s one of the most important rules of time travel. You cannot meet yourself in an earlier time. It would unravel the fabric of space and time.”

Barbara sighed equally dismally. It was just too cruel to be this close to that normality she longed for.

Then Ian acted impulsively. He hit the door control and ran for it before The Doctor could move around the console to close it again.

“Why, its Trafalgar Square!” he exclaimed as he stepped out onto pavement covered in a light dusting of slushy snow. “Trafalgar Square on New Year’s Eve.”

Indeed, it was Trafalgar Square. The TARDIS had materialised right against the great Portland stone plinth on which one of the huge lions beneath Nelson’s Column rested. Around the monument and a huge Christmas tree, people dressed in warm clothing were gathered in cheerful and excited groups. None of them were startled by the arrival of the TARDIS. That remarkable event seemed to have passed unnoticed.

“Well, there you are,” Barbara said enthusiastically. “On New Year’s Eve of 1962 I was at Saint Thomas’ Hospital with a friend of mine who was ill. I was nowhere near Trafalgar Square. What about you, Ian?”

“I was at a very dull party in Finchley,” Ian answered. “I remember thinking it would have been more interesting if you had been there. I didn’t know about your friend. You never said anything about her….”

“It all seemed a bit irrelevant by the time the school term started,” Barbara answered him vaguely, her thoughts elsewhere. “Susan… what about you and The Doctor, and the TARDIS for that matter. Where were you?”

“Just… nothing, really. We were in the TARDIS, in the junkyard in Totters Lane. New Year isn’t really something our people make much of. We watched the news, with a report about the revellers in the Square, but we really didn’t do much else.”

The Doctor frowned. Susan knew why. She hadn’t been entirely truthful. Their people DID celebrate their New Year with lavish rituals. But that was a long time ago. She and her grandfather didn’t do anything that even resembled the culture of the world they were exiles from, now.

“Well, come on,” Barbara said to her. “Let’s go and enjoy ourselves. Doctor, you surely see there IS no real danger in just spending one evening among ordinary human beings.”

“There is much danger,” The Doctor replied. “The temptation to interfere… to try to change what cannot be changed.”

“Change what?” Ian asked in exasperation. “All I’m thinking of right now is a bag of hot chestnuts from that man over there. The smell of them is driving me crazy. Barbara, Susan, how do you feel about hot chestnuts?”

“Mmm, yes,” Susan and Barbara both answered. They stepped out of the TARDIS together and went to the metal handcart with its charcoal fire radiating welcome heat on a wintry night. They gathered close while the man filled cone shaped paper bags with portions of sweet chestnuts.

The Doctor watched them from the TARDIS door and sighed resignedly. He reached for his outdoor coat, hat and scarf and then followed his granddaughter and companions out into the busy square.

The cold air caught his breath as soon as he stepped over the threshold, but it was a clean air without the smog that so often suffocated London. It didn’t cause him as much trouble as he might have expected. Spending a little time in healthier climates had given his lungs a new lease of life.

“Here, you go, Doctor.” Ian brought him a bag of chestnuts. The Doctor looked at them disparagingly for a moment, then accepted the offering graciously. Even a Time Lord could appreciate the warm smell and the crumbly texture and taste of chestnuts.

“It won’t do, you know,” he said, still maintaining a gruff exterior. “Maybe for a few hours, here in this small location. But the idea of staying here, you and Barbara…. I know you’ve been thinking about it….”

“We could go somewhere… Brighton, Scotland… France. We could stay out of the way until after that day… when we left… when we will leave… with you and Susan. After that, we could just go back to our old life.”

“No,” The Doctor insisted. “No. I will not… I cannot allow it. I forbid it… I….”

“You forbid it?” Ian shook his head angrily. “Who made you my boss? Who are you to stop me… stop Barbara and I… from walking away, right now?”

The Doctor began to speak, then stopped. Ian was right, of course. His human companions had deferred to his greater knowledge of alien worlds and historical locations, but here in their own world, in what was temptingly close to their own time, he had no authority over them.

Even Susan. She had liked living on Earth. Could he even stop her from walking away with them?

“Do as you will,” he snapped. His hand crumpled the chestnut bag that had been meant as a peace offering. “On your own heads be it.”

Ian gave up trying to reason with The Doctor and went in search of Barbara and Susan. They had talked about looking at the circus acts. On the far side of the Square near the steps up to the National Gallery, a temporary structure was lit from below as a tightrope walker performed his daring act. A clown on stilt legs was also visible above the regular sized people and as Ian drew near he saw jugglers and fire eaters in the roped off performance area.

He spotted Susan watching it all with wide, interested eyes, but he didn’t see Barbara.

“She… said she had to make a phone call,” Susan explained when Ian asked her.

“A phone call? To whom?”

Susan looked at Ian in surprise at not having asked the question herself.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Do you think I should have stopped her? I think it might be one of the things Grandfather warned us about.”

“I’m a little tired of your Grandfather telling us what we can and can’t do,” Ian admitted just a little too candidly.

“He means well,” Susan answered. “Besides, the real reason he’s annoyed is the same as the reason I’m upset. He doesn’t want this to be our last night. He wants you to stay… at least a little while longer, so he can get used to the idea.”

“He didn’t want us in the first place,” Ian reminded her. “Now he’s cross that we might want to go. It’s ludicrous, contrary….”

“I know. And so does he, though he would never admit it. And that makes it worse. He’s… old. Much older than you realise. He worries a lot more than he should. And he IS more stubborn a man than you will ever meet. If he weren’t, neither of us would ever have left our world. It was his stubbornness that….”

Susan stopped talking abruptly. She looked at Ian in alarm.

“No, that isn’t my story to tell. You should forget I said anything. Please don’t even hint to Grandfather about such things.”

“Of course, not. Look, maybe we all need a bit of time to cool our heads and think about things. And, after all, New Year’s Eve is the time for that sort of thing… you know, making amends.”

That was exactly what Barbara had thought when she spotted the ordinary telephone box up above the Square on the busy road that went all around it. Making amends with an old friend was something she had been thinking about ever since she realised what day it was.

Stella Boland had been her ‘chum’ since high school. It was Stella who used that word, ‘chum’ straight out of an Enid Blyton story. It was just the sort of thing Stella did. They had gone to university together, shared rooms to make their money go further. Even afterwards, when Stella had taken the solicitor’s exams and Barbara had gone onto teacher training, they had stayed in touch, meeting often for lunch or evenings at the cinema.

They had never really argued even though the cause of their estrangement had been a man. Barbara had liked Geoff Audsley. She had dated him once, sort of. She and Stella had met him and his friend, Frank Hardinge for dinner and theatre. They had not really been paired off. But she had thought that Geoff was…. Geoff was…..

And then the next week when they had lunch Stella was talking all about Geoff and the plans they had made. Dinner, a weekend at his father’s brother’s country house, something about a yacht berthed in Southampton Marina.

Barbara hadn’t made a scene, hadn’t accused her friend of ‘stealing’ Geoff or any such thing, but she had been so disappointed that she didn’t go to their next lunch, or the next. She didn’t answer the phone if she thought it was Stella, and eventually Stella stopped calling.

And Barbara had finished training and got her first teaching job. That not only kept her busy at lunchtime in the school staffroom and in the evenings with ‘marking’, but it brought her into a new social circle of fellow teachers. Stella was not the only friend from her past that she saw less of.

What she hadn’t known was that Stella’s social circle had become even smaller, so much so that when the hospital had tried to find somebody just after midnight on New Year’s Day Barbara’s number was the only one that was answered.

And by then it was too late. She was already in a coma from the brain aneurysm that had struck her down earlier the previous day. She never felt Barbara holding her hand. She never heard her voice, telling her that Geoff really didn’t matter and she was sorry she let something so unimportant get in the way of friendship.

She wanted to do something. At first she had thought of calling a taxi and going to the hospital now. But there weren’t any taxis on New Year’s Eve, and besides, that would be the sort of thing that changed history in small ways, the thing The Doctor had warned about.

If she was there already, the hospital wouldn’t have called her at midnight.

But what if the call came earlier in the evening?

She dialled a number she knew well and was almost surprised by the voice on the other end when the call was connected. She wondered what she sounded like. Perhaps the echoing emptiness of the phone box would make her voice sound different enough.

“Hello,” she said. “Barbara, listen to me and don’t ask questions. You should go to the hospital now. Go to see Stella. Don’t wait until they call you. It’ll be too late by then. Go, now, or you’ll always regret it.”

She heard herself on the other end of the line asking questions like ‘who is this?’ and ‘how did you get my number?’.

“Just go, please,” she added, then put the phone down. She stepped out of the phone box and looked around at the gathering crowds. Ian and Susan were watching the fire eaters. There was no sign of The Doctor. She was glad of that. She didn’t want to lie to him and she wasn’t prepared to argue about the truth.

Because it had worked. As she walked down the steps into the crowded Square again she knew it had. Her memories had changed a little like a film sometimes dissolved from one scene to another. Now, instead of the phone call and the frantic trip to the hospital, hoping it wasn’t too late, she had gone there hours before. Stella had been very ill, but not so far gone that she didn’t recognise an old friend. There had been hugs and tears, and they had said everything that needed to be said.

There were tears now as she remembered, but they weren’t tears of regret. That was the difference that really mattered.

She wiped the tears away and went to find Ian. He was still watching the circus acts. He turned and smiled as she came alongside him and held out a hand.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

“Everything is fine,” Barbara answered. “Just fine.”

She would probably explain to Ian. He was her closest confidante these days. She trusted him with all of her deepest feelings about the strange situations they found themselves in.

But not yet. Not until this night was over, when the ‘earlier’ her had gone home and it was all over.

“Have you thought about how strange it is to be here, right now, knowing what we know about the coming year,” Ian said. “All the things that happened…. Profumo and the government collapsing, the train robbery….”

“What do you want to do? Warn the police about the robbery?”

Ian laughed.

“The number of times I’ve been somebody’s prisoner since we met The Doctor I think I’d rather warn the robbers to watch out,” Ian answered.

“Yes, I think I know what you mean,” Barbara agreed, thinking briefly of the terrible prison in Paris where she and Susan had suffered very badly.

“I could bet on the Derby, the Grand National….” Ian continued.

“You don’t gamble,” Barbara reminded Ian. “Besides, do you remember who won either of those races. I’ve forgotten. I do remember some really bad things that happened this year, though. President Kennedy…. And… about the same time, late in the autumn… there had been some nasty child murders in the north of England. If we could use what we know, I’d much rather do something about those than make money we don’t deserve.”

“We can’t, can we,” Ian concluded sadly. “Those things happened. We can’t do anything to change them. Even though they haven’t happened, yet, we can’t change anything.”

“I thought I could change the Aztecs,” Barbara reminded him. “But history was against me. And the Crusades, the French Revolution. We were just carried along with events. We couldn’t stop any of it from happening.”

“We weren’t meant to,” Ian admitted. “And I don’t think we’re meant to do anything about the things that are going to happen this year. They’re part of history, too.”

“Even though everyone here except us hasn’t lived it, yet.”

“Yes.”

“This is why The Doctor doesn’t think we should be here.”

“Yes.”

“I think he might give us the benefit of the doubt. Did he expect us to set up a fortune teller’s tent or something?”

“I don’t know. But….”

Ian stopped speaking and looked around suddenly. He had just realised that Susan wasn’t with them. The Square was very crowded now as the build up to midnight gained momentum and it would be too easy to get thoroughly lost.

“Did she say anything?” he asked. “How long has she been gone?”

“I don’t know. But I do wish we hadn’t talked about The Doctor in such a way. She might be upset with us about that. We forget sometimes that he IS her grandfather. She’s very loyal towards him.”

“It's all right. I think I see her,” Ian said. “Though I’m not sure I like the look of things....”

Barbara followed his gaze. That was certainly Susan heading towards the steps leading up towards the National Gallery.

She was not alone.

“Ian... who is that?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like the look of that at all.”

He immediately went after her. Barbara paused just a moment before hurrying after him.

Ian had every reason to be concerned. He really didn’t think of himself as Susan’s beleaguered science teacher any more. He was more of a friend, a comrade in arms through some very tricky situations. He tried not to be the heavy handed older man. Goodness knows The Doctor was that often enough. She needed him and Barbara to be easier on her.

But if this was what it looked like he knew he might have to be ‘teacher’ again in a very real way. If that meant losing the rank of ‘friend’ then it would just have to be that way.

And as he drew closer he recognised the young man who was leading Susan away from the relative safety of the New Years Eve crowds on the Square. Nigel Crompton was older than Susan. He had left Coal Hill School in the summer of nineteen-sixty-two with mediocre qualifications and little prospects. He still hung around with some of the fourth and fifth years, boys younger than him who were likely to follow his lead into unemployment and girls who were silly enough to be attracted to his ‘maturity’. He spent most of his time tinkering with a clapped out van and smoking cigarettes on street corners with students who ought to have been in school. He gained their spurious admiration by talking back to any teacher who challenged him. He enjoyed their lack of power over him as an ex-pupil.

Ian held back a little, hoping he wouldn’t have to intervene, but when Susan cried out suddenly and tried to turn away from Crompton he had no choice.

“Step away from her,” he called out to the youth who grasped Susan roughly by the arm and tried to stop her from betting away. “Susan, it’s all right. Go to Barbara.”

Susan’s coat sleeve tore as she wrenched away from Crompton. Barbara hurried forward and took her gently by the shoulders. Crompton sneered as Ian stepped towards him.

“What are you going to do, Mr Chesterton? Give me a detention? Or maybe the cane? Do you think you’re man enough?”

A year or so back, without the school disciplinary system to back him up, Crompton might have been right. The youth was a street fighter who would have bragged about beating up a teacher.

But Ian Chesterton had fought better equipped and better trained than him in the course of the year and a half he had travelled with The Doctor. The toughest had probably been Ixta, the Aztec champion who had been prepared to fight him to the death.

Crompton was brawny and he fought dirty, but he wasn’t even a shadow of Ixta. Ian laid him flat in a very few moves.

“Come near Susan, or any other girl from Coal Hill again and I’ll make you regret it,” he said, leaning over the groaning youth. “And don’t imagine you can complain to anyone. I've got an impeccable alibi for tonight.”

He thought about that alibi as he walked away from the snivelling coward that Crompton proved to be when challenged. That New Year’s Eve party he had been so bored by in what felt like another lifetime had been at the headmaster's house. As well as several other teachers in attendance there had been several of the Head’s friends and neighbours including a Justice of the Peace and a police inspector. They could all confirm that he was nowhere near the spot where Nigel Crompton got his just desserts.

He turned back to Susan and Barbara. The former was looking very sorry for herself.

“She’s all right,” Barbara confirmed. “He didn’t have chance to do any real harm, and she’s learnt the hard way not to pay attention to boys of that sort.”

“I should have thought you knew about that before now, Susan,” Ian responded chidingly.

“Oh, Ian, please don’t tell him…. Grandfather, I mean. He’ll be so cross. I... always liked Nigel in a way. He's so good looking and he never even looked at me at school because I was a year younger than him. But... well, I’m not fifteen, now. I'm nearly seventeen and when he saw me here and asked me to come with him…. I thought.... But… But….”

“Let's just leave it at that,” Barbara insisted, sparing Susan any further explanation of what had scared her about Crompton’s manner. “She could do with washing her face so that The Doctor doesn’t notice anything is wrong. Can you distract him while we slip back into the TARDIS to freshen up?”

“I can try,” Ian promised. They walked together through the thickening crowds and then Ian went ahead and found The Doctor leaning against the Lion’s plinth opposite to the one the TARDIS was parked against. He was smoking his pipe and letting his mind drift to another time and place entirely. When he saw Ian, he began talking about the Battle of Trafalgar in a way that suggested personal experience. Ian didn’t believe a word of it, but feigning interest gave the ladies the respite they needed.

When Barbara and Susan returned they had both washed their faces and re-applied their make-up. Susan had put on a new coat and looked more cheerful. No doubt Barbara had been able to say a few reassuring things about ‘boys’ to a girl with precious little experience of them apart from evading marriage to the Perfect Sacrifice of that Aztec community.

The Doctor didn’t notice that anything had upset his granddaughter at all. Or if he did notice he kept his own counsel and trusted Barbara’s judgement on it.

Around them the excitement was building, meanwhile. It was nearly midnight. Soon all other activities ceased as a gestalt voice counted down. That was followed by a moment of expectant silence before the boom of Big Ben’s authoritative voice heralded the year Nineteen-Sixty-Three. It was the second time it had done so for the four of them, but they held hands and sang Auld Lang Syne with the rest of the crowd.

Memories of both the year just gone and the year coming crowded their minds. In particular, Ian found himself with a changed memory. Instead of recalling several unpleasant encounters between Nigel Crompton and various male teachers at Coal Hill he recalled hearing from the fifth formers first that Nigel had left London and gone to Liverpool or Manchester, or possibly Newcastle, and then that he had been arrested and imprisoned in one of those far northern cities for GBH or some other unsavoury crime and had been jailed. That meant he was well away from Susan in her last few months at Coal Hill, and that was certainly a good thing. Away from all the other girls and any impressionable boys who thought his thuggery was to be emulated was good, too.

He caught The Doctor’s glance once and wondered if the old man knew what had happened somehow. There was an expression on his face that could have been interpreted both ways, as disappointment and disapproval of the blatant disregard for the rules of time travel and at the same time absolute approval for Ian’s method of handling what could have been a very bad experience for Susan.

The party continued after all the church bells of London were silent again, but there was a common consensus that their own group were done with it. Barbara pointed out just one desirable aspect of the late night event.

“A fish and chip van!” she exclaimed. “I really could eat old fashioned fish and chips from newspaper wrappers right now.”

“Oh, yes,” Susan agreed. “Oh, but, let’s sit down inside the TARDIS to eat them. It IS awfully cold out and the chips will cool down fast.”

“I’ll go,” Ian decided. “Everyone else go in and get warmed up.”

He fetched the packages of food without incident. Meanwhile, Susan had made steaming mugs of cocoa. They ate that curiously mundane supper together surrounded by the alien technology of the TARDIS console room. When it was done, they all looked at each other. There was still a question to be answered.

Barbara unscrewed a piece of the newspaper her chip supper had been wrapped in. There was a picture of the Kennedy family having Christmas at the White House. Their last such Christmas though they didn’t know it. Barbara felt a pang of sorrow for them and for other tragedies ahead in the year that was still less than an hour old.

“No,” she said slowly. “I do want to get home, one of these days. But I don’t think I could live through a year I’ve already lived through once. This isn’t the way we’re going to leave the TARDIS.”

She looked at Ian who nodded in agreement.

She looked at The Doctor who said nothing and gave away nothing in his face.

Susan’s face gave away everything. She was relieved beyond measure at the decision. Of course a parting was inevitable, one day, but not just yet.

“Well,” The Doctor said, turning to the console and reaching for the dematerialisation switch. “Well, let us see where the old TARDIS takes us next, and what adventures lie in store.”

Outside, in the snowy cheer of Trafalgar Square, nobody even noticed the police box disappear from beside the Column. They were too busy celebrating.