**Pikes Peak**

Ray (Rachel) Dedwydd smiled happily as she helped in the labour of getting the Vincent onto the back of a Chevrolet Longhorn – a rather old example having collected dust and dirt since the 1970s, but still working well enough to transport herself, The Doctor and more importantly, the bike, to where they needed to be at two-thirty on a June morning.

She was excited. She had raced the Vincent on a couple of alien worlds where they appreciated mechanical speed and had done track days at Brands Hatch and Silverstone as well the Nürburgring and a speed trial at Bonneville Flats, all thanks to The Doctor being able to take her anywhere.

This was even more exciting than Bonneville Flats, which was, as the name suggested, flat – a white plain glittering under the sun that was the remnant of a long dried out saltwater lake in Utah. She had done well, there, coming fifth out of forty riders, all the rest men, of course.

But flat riding was relatively easy, she said.

This was Pikes Peak, in the Colorado Rockies. She knew the statistics by heart. Twelve-point-four-two miles of asphalt, one hundred and fity-six turns, climbing four thousand, seven hundred and twenty feet from the start point at Mile Seven on Pikes Peak Highway, on gradients averaging seven-point-two percent, to the finish near the mountain peak at fourteen thousand, one hundred and fifteen feet above sea level.

The Pikes Peak International Hill Climb, also known as The Race to the Clouds, was something Billy had always dreamed about, back in Wales in the 1950s. He talked about being the first European to compete. But he had left Earth for his new life with Delta and the Princess long before 1984 when Norwegian driver Martin Schanche drove in a 4x4 Ford Escort Mk3.

Now it was up to her to do honour to Billy’s dream, and so they were here, in the year 2026, when, if she had stayed on Earth, she would be too old to even think of such a thing.

The Doctor had booked several nights in a hotel that made her Holiday Camp back in South Wales look positively shabby. It had a swimming pool, golf links, a sauna, aromatherapy and hairdresser. She had tried the pool, sauna and aromatherapy yesterday afternoon, but she was saving the hairdresser for after she was done riding. She was well aware of what a racing helmet did to any sort of style.

An afternoon enjoying being a girl seemed a world away as The Doctor drove them up to Mile Seven for the practice session. It was held early in the morning because this WAS a highway all year around, barring the worst winter snows. It was a popular one with tourists driving up one of the highest roads in the USA with the most spectacular views.

She couldn't see the views, yet. It was too dark. Beyond the very good road lighting was a void that her imagination filled with impenetrable pine woods and drops into vertiginous canyons.

She would see it all soon enough.

“Seems like only a moment ago I was settling into a lovely warm, queen-size bed,” she remarked as they joined a small parade of trucks and lorries bearing cars and bikes to the mustering point, “Am I a prize chump for not staying in it?”

It was a rhetorical question. As nice as the hotel facilities were, this was what she came for.

It was why she had chosen to travel with The Doctor in the first place, for that matter. Adventure, excitement, in places she never dreamt of seeing, either in space or right here on Earth.

“You know, I found out what two en-suite rooms and a sitting room in that hotel cost at this time of year,” she added. “It really WAS nice of you to splash out.”

The Doctor didn’t say anything, just shrugged self-effacingly.

“Doctor… it isn’t… you’re not….”

She paused, not sure how to phrase the next bit.

You’re not treating me like that because it’s going to be our last time together, are you?” she blurted out. There was no way to dress it up.

“Whatever do you mean?” he asked. He didn’t look at her, because a mountain road in the dark wasn’t something even a Time Lord with lightning reflexes took his eyes off, but he was listening.

“People don’t stay with you forever,” she said. “Mel, who was with you when I first saw you went her own way. So did Ace, the girl who replaced her. And… they were both younger than me. I wondered…..”

“Nobody has ever left because I was tired of them,” The Doctor assured her. “A lot of them have fallen in love and gone off to be happy. Mel went off with a disreputable character called Sabalom Glitz. I don’t think that one was exactly love. But others – My own Susan, Vicki, Jo, Leela… Not Sarah-Jane…. That was a bit different. And Romana. Tegan… was fed up with me, if anything. But love definitely came into it a lot.”

“I don’t think I’m going to fall in love with anyone,” Ray said quietly.

“Then stay with me until you’re an old, old lady,” The Doctor told her. “I will be glad of your company. As for the hotel… I thought it might be nicer than camping by the roadside in the TARDIS, and the posh one was the only one not fully booked eight months in advance. And yes, I DID use the TARDIS to go back that far. This is a VERY popular weekend.”

“Well… then I should enjoy all of it – including the aromatherapy session. Though later, I think I’ll just want breakfast and a long sleep in that comfy bed.”

It was still dark beyond the highway when they reached a double-lane toll booth built of locally sourced and sustainable pine logs. Normally this would be locked in the middle of the night, but for this practice session it was fully open and no tolls being charged to race competitors.

Beyond the toll booth the trucks were marshalled into laybys and an assorted collection of cars and bikes were unloaded. Race officials checked paperwork. Ray showed them her race licence and ordinary Uk driving licence. These two documents had been skilfully forged by The Doctor to allow her to compete as a woman born in Cardiff in the mid nineteen-eighties, rather than a war baby of the nineteen-forties.

The documents passed muster easily and she was issued an official race number and a place in the queue for practice time.

While all that was going on The Doctor bought coffee and donuts in a van owned by a man with an eye for an opportunity and watched. Donuts were not something he often ate, but Amercans seemed to thrive on them and these were freshly made and warm.

He quietly munched away and listened lazily to the thoughts of those around him. It was a Time Lord talent he only rarely used. People’s minds shouldn’t be violated. Especially when they didn’t know it was happening to them.

But some of the things he heard in those heads disturbed him. He listened closer to be sure he was not mistaken, then looked at where Ray was talking with some other fire-suit clad bike riders getting ready for the practice session.

She seemed happy and animated in her conversation about carburettors and clutches, racing fairings, filters, race lines and lap times and every technical detail even he, a pretty decent temporal engineer, didn’t fully understand.

She didn’t know what the men were thinking as they listened to her.

If she did, she would have been less happy.

“Oh Ray, my dear sweet girl, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea, The Doctor thought.

She came to him smiling after the group conversation broke up. The Doctor put his thoughts aside and offered her coffee and donuts for the energy rush and sandwiches for the protein and carbohydrates her body needed. She ate hungrily and quickly while talking animatedly.

“I can’t wait to get going on my practice run,” she said. “This really is the best hill climb on Earth. Thank you for bringing me here. I know... I’ve said that a hundred times already....”

“Well, not quite a hundred.”

One day there should be something I can do for you, Doctor,” she said.

The Doctor said nothing out loud, but his thoughts were almost loud enouh.

“There is nothing I need from you except your companionship in the TARDIS... Travelling with me... Making the light years less lonely. That is more than enough. And.... You may do that until you are thoroughly tired of me.”

He meant it, too. He had never wanted any of his friends to leave the TARDIS. If Ray chose to stay until she was old and grey she would still be as welcome. He had no other agenda but companionship.

“Will you see me off?” She asked and he realised he was daydreaming and had completely misunderstood her meaning.

“On your practice, you mean?” He smiled to hide his relief. “Wild beasts wouldn’t stop me.”

A group of riders were called together, Ray among them. The Doctor saw them looking as she hid her hair in the fire hood and then her crash helmet. He could FEEL their disdain for a woman trying to get in on a man’s game.

He felt less kind words than ‘woman’ pass through some minds and his blood boiled at those ungentlemay ideas.

But he couldn’t say anything. It would hurt Ray too much to know how her very existence was resented by people who didn’t even know her.

His resolve to say nothing almost broke, though, when he heard a voice comment about her bike.

Before he had a chance, somebody else spoke.

“Are you kidding? That’s a mint condifion Vincent Black Shadow, 1948. That’s the bike that set the record at Bonneville in its day. It’s the king of bikes. Anything built since is just minor royalty.”

“Yeah.... Maybe,” the first voice conceded. “But... She....”

“She is half the weight of most of us. That’s her advantage regardless of how good she handles the bike. If she can hold her nerve, she’ll wipe the floor with you all.”

Ray heard none of that because she was listening to a last word from the race officials and then she was waiting for her signal.

Then she was off. Even The Doctor was a little surprised how quickly she was gone, taking the first corner with a speed that caused impressed murmurs among some of her doubters.

“That old museum piece sure does go,” admitted the man who had disparaged the Vincent. “And I guess she can burn rubber.…”

The other man said nothing. His point was proven already.

It was only a half hour before all the bikes were at the top and the support crews were allowed to go and collect vehicles and riders.

Oddly enough, The Doctor noted, Ray’s gallant supporter wasn’t among anyone’s team, even though he had mingled with them all. Yet he certainly knew motor-bikes – especially classic British ones. His accent was indefinable, but, for example, when he said ‘you all’ most people in this part of America might have said ‘y’all’. It set him apart from the crowd.

Then again, colloquialisms didn’t come easy to The Doctor, either. And this WAS an international competition. Perhaps the non-competitor was a journalist or something else quite innocuous.

He put the question out of his mind as he drove in the pre-dawn light towards the Peak mustering point. There he was a little surprised to see the same man talking to Ray who was flushed with excitement, her eyes bright and her breath coming quickly.

The last time The Doctor had seen her quite that excited in the presence of a man, it was Billy, her teenage crush.

But this was all about the thrill of the Pikes Peak ride. She was talking about it all so intensely she barely noticed The Doctor joining her.

“Save some excitement for the big day,” he said to her as the man departed quickly - too quickly? Or was he over-reacting?

He might have asked a question or two, but it WAS none of his business and besides, Ray only stopped talking about her practice session long enough to gasp out loud at the sunrise that almost instantly brooked the mountain tops and filled the valley with golden light.

It was truly a magnificent sight, both for a lady who grew up near the Black Mountains of South Wales and a Time Lord who had ridden solar flares. The drops they had only imagined in the dark were, indeed, vertiginous. The valley was far below with a river like a mere ribbon winding through it. A mountain lake that may have fed the river with a tributary glistened in the morning light.

“No wonder country singers go on about Colorado,” Ray said. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, it is,” The Doctor agreed. “But when we get down this mountain it is still bed for you, dear girl.”

Ray agreed. Beneath the exhilaration, she could feel tiredness trying to catch up on her. But she did have a parting shot before lapsing into drowsy silence in the passenger seat of the Longhorn.

“When I’m ninety, will you still call me ‘dear girl’?”

“You’ll still be hundreds of years younger than me, so, yes,” The Doctor answered.

“That’s ok, then,” she conceded, then closed her eyes happily.

Even The Doctor who never seemed to sleep in the TARDIS availed of the expensive bed he had paid for until lunchtime, at least. He went looking for coffee and a sandwich in the lounge-bar and was only slightly surprised when that same man joined him at a window table.

“I thought I should introduce myself,” he said, holding out a hand to shake. “I’m Ford McLaren….”

A likely story, The Doctor thought.

“A nicely inconspicuous name around here,” he said blithely.

“Yes….” McLaren answered, uncertain if he was being teased or uncovered. “I… er.…”

“I notice that you have made friends with Ray,” The Doctor said, letting him off the hook for now. “She is having some trouble in that way. Rather too much machismo around here.”

“She is a fine woman…. And a great bike rider,” McLaren answered. “Her qualifying time will have closed a lot of mouths.”

“But not their thoughts, I rather feel,” The Doctor agreed. “I hope nobody turns those thoughts to sabotage of the Vincent.”

“I am happy to keep my eye on anyone who might make trouble,” McLaren offered. “I wonder… though….”

He paused before asking a difficult question.

“Ray… Is she your… um…your….”

“Niece,” The Doctor answered. It wasn’t the first time he had been asked that sort of question and he had the response prepared. “I am the one who funds her racing ambitions. But NOT her chaperone. She is a free spirit. I wouldn’t dare.”

“The reason I.… I have asked if she would accompany me to the dance tonight…. It is a get together for competitors and their crews. She… seemed to think you would object….”

“She IS a free spirit. She doesn’t need my permission. But it is the race tomorrow. How late is this dance?”

“Shuts down at midnight. The race muster is at midday. Plenty of rest time. Soft drinks provided for competitors. Line-dancing unavoidable, but otherwise quite civilised.”

“Then we’ll both be there, but I’ll be sitting out the dances… old knee injury, you know.”

McLaren saw The Doctor’s wink and visibly relaxed.

Love was the most recurring reason young women left his company The Doctor reminded himself. Perhaps….

Or perhaps he was jumping the gun. It was just a dance.

After spending so much time in racing gear, dressing up for the evening appealed to Ray. She spent a good hour in her room perfecting the dress, hair, shoes and make-up and emerged looking elegant in light turquoise silk-satin, the best the TARDIS wardrobe had to offer. The Doctor in a smart linen suit took her arm and led her proudly to the hotel’s function room.

McLaren was there, very carefully ensuring that they met by chance, and swept Ray off to the dance floor. The Doctor found a seat where he could drink lemonade and watch without her knowing she was being watched.

She was having a good time. McLaren was attentive to her, bringing her to sit when a fast dance wore her out, buying all the soft drinks she could want on the night before a big race and drawing her back into one of those unavoidable line dances and a slow, soft waltz just before midnight when the party finished with a respectful rendition of the US National Anthem.

McLaren walked up to the suite with Ray and The Doctor, but she was definitely drooping and said goodnight to them both in the sitting room.

“Have a coffee with me,” The Doctor offered as Ray’s door closed firmly. McLaren accepted the offer. The hotel suite included a coffee machine with a range of choices in capsules. They both chose simple lattes and drank quietly for a little while.

“Ford McLaren?” The Doctor queried with a wry smile. “That’s the name your mother sewed into your vest when you went to school, was it?”

McLaren looked worried, but The Doctor smiled even more wryly and reached out to McLaren’s right arm.

“Vortex manipulator… Time Agent standard issue? Fifty-first century?”

“You’re from the future, too? I wasn’t sure at first. But….”

“Actually, I’m from another planet and Ray is from the past. But clearly, we’re all from somewhere else. Are you on a mission?”

“Yes. I… I thought you might be an accomplice – to the man I’m after - at first. But I ruled you out quite easily.”

“Truth detector function on your vortex manipulator? I’ve come across agents and their gadgets from time to time. My own people have studied your organisation’s activities, of course. They are a little contemptuous of your primitive time travel techniques. No, don’t be alarmed by that. It would be more of a problem if they thought humans might start to rival them. As it is, you’re judged harmless to all but your own species.”

McLaren still looked worried, as well as a little angry at the Time Lord arrogance that deemed his work ‘harmless’. But The Doctor’s smile was disarming and, besides, his ‘truth device’ was giving him a green light to trust this Time Lord if not the rest.

And there was something he needed to come clean about.

“I want you to know… the reason I was interested in Ray… it WASN’T just to get near you. She is… special. A really special lady. That’s the only reason…. I don’t want either of you to get the wrong idea….”

“Tell me about your mission,” The Doctor said, passing over the awkwardness that was mainly in McLaren’s mind.

“He’s dangerous. Silas Ardent – he always has been. A racketeer and robber, extortionist, murderer. He’s particularly wanted in the fifty-first century for kidnapping the wife of a bank CEO and torturing her in ways you don’t want to know about until the man gave up the key codes to fifteen high level accounts. Then he killed the wife and stole a time agent’s vortex manipulator. His plan was to go fifty years forward until the case was cold and then collect his blood money. It went wrong. The vortex manipulator was faulty. He got thrown back to this century, instead. We traced him through the vortex signature, but he’s found a bolt hole I can’t get into. I had hoped he might make an appearance at the Race for the Clouds. The one thing we know for sure about his personal life is that – like he loves speed – any kind of engines – hydro, electric, old-fashioned combustion. So I thought the races might flush him out. But….”

“No sign? You’d know, of course. Time travel – even shielded in my ship – leaves a harmless trace radiation. Your own vortex manipulator would give out a signal.”

“Yes. That’s why I first realised that you and Ray were… different. Even the Vincent. It’s travelled in time. Which explains why it looks so good. It’s skipped a decade or two.”

“Good guess,” The Doctor said. “This bolt hole you can’t get into. There’s only one place in this vicinity I can think of. Very clever of him. The one place your scans couldn’t penetrate. And getting in there is pretty much impossible. They stopped doing civilian toura after the 9-11 attacks. Even your vortex manipulator would be repulsed by their layers of shielding.”

He named the place. McLaren nodded glumly while admiring The Doctor’s powers of deduction.

“Your technology won’t get you in,” he said. “Mine will.”

McLaren stared at him in surprise.

“You… propose… co-operation?”

“Even the USA don’t deserve such a person left free to commit ugly crimes. When we confront him… Do you have the means to restrain him without harm to others? And without any undue fuss?”

“Yes. I have a special vortex manipulator with an unbreakable single destination setting – our lunar penal colony. All I need is a lock on his DNA pattern. As for fuss… I hope not. But it’s a well-guarded site. I don’t know for sure.”

“We’ll take the chance. Come on.”

McLaren, if the truth gismo was turned on himself, would have to admit to a couple of alcoholic drinks at the party, though he felt sober enough – at least until he saw the TARDIS in the corner of The Doctor’s bedroom and wasn’t sure about anything.

“No wonder your people think our time travel is primitive,” he said as he gazed around the console room. “This is beyond anything we have….”

“It doesn’t have a truth detector,” The Doctor admitted. “And I’ve never seen the need for voice activated controls or tractor beams and the like. She’ll do what we need her to do tonight.”

It was thirty-five miles by road, or a little over fifteen as the TARDIS flies, to Cheyenne Mountain Space Force Station, known for many fanciful things including a gateway to other planets and the world-renowned NORAD Santa Tracker. It was actually just a monitoring station for possible incursions into American airspace by unfriendly governments. Scary in the long view of history, but thoroughly mundane on any ordinary working day.

It didn’t have a large crew living at the underground base. Most of its people had homes in nearby Colorado Springs. But it had some dormitories for the use of personnel on long assignments. The Doctor and McLaren guessed that Silas Ardent had been manipulating his own shift patterns so that nobody noticed he never left the shelter of the huge mountain above the base.

And it looked as if they guessed right. After materialising the TARDIS inside a very mundane cleaning equipment store they located the rogue time travelling alien in the rest area just along the corridor. Happily, no alarms had alerted anyone to the presence of the intruders. Security at the Mountain assumed a frontal assault if there should ever be one.

“How come you accepted me as what I said I was?” McLaren asked as they blended into their new environment wearing brown janitor’s coats and carrying mops. “I might have been the criminal trying to evade the Time Agency,”

“I can read minds…. If I choose to do so. Your unlikely name made me curious. Plus, I wanted to be sure about your intentions towards Ray.”

“You said you WEREN’T her chaperone.”

“I’m her friend. I won’t have her hurt by anyone. As for your mind… all I got was a brick wall and a sense of your basic honesty. Your training worked superbly.”

“And my intentions towards Ray?”

“We’re only here for a couple of days more. And I presume you will have to report back once your mission is over. Your options are limited in that respect.”

“Yes,” McLaren agreed. He took a deep breath to say more, but a bleep from his vortex manipulator alerted him moments before two people, a man and a woman, turned into the corridor. Both were dressed in American Air Force uniform. The woman was unconcerned by the sight of cleaning staff in the small hours of the morning, but the man became immediately alarmed as he looked at McLaren, instinctively reaching for a weapon before realising he was unarmed.

“Excuse me, Miss,” The Doctor said, approaching the woman and glancing at her name tag. “I beg your pardon, Lieutenant. Would you look at this, please.”

He had taken the blue crystal back to Metebelis III centuries ago, but anything with a shine could do in a pinch. He pulled a large diamond from his pocket and mesmerised the Lieutenant with only a few passes.

Meanwhile, McLaren had subdued his quarry with some smart unarmed combat moves and slapped the one-way vortex manipulator on his wrist before standing back from its field of influence. Without any blue glow or other dramatic effect, Silas Ardent vanished into the ether, transported to his rightful place of detention.

“Thank you for your patience,” The Doctor told the Lieutenant, who had clearly forgotten she had been talking to somebody else a few minutes ago. She nodded in reply and walked away.

“Mission accomplished,” The Doctor said. “Well, nearly.”

Back in the TARDIS he spent a few minutes adding Ardent’s immediate resignation to the Cheyenne Mountain’s computer system and revoking his entry pass. His absence would not concern anyone for very long.

McLaren reported to his superiors and double-checked that the prisoner had, indeed, arrived at the penal colony. He also booked a few days’ leave.

“I want to see how Ray does tomorrow,” he said. The Doctor made no objection. It was important to them both.

Ten-thirty the next day saw Ray picking nervously at a late breakfast or early lunch – she wasn’t sure which. It all tasted of sawdust anyway in her anticipation of the afternoon.

“What do you think of Ford?” she asked The Doctor in as casual a voice as she could manage.

“The manufacturer, the car or the racing team?” he answered.

“You know who I mean. He seems… nice.”

“I believe he is very nice,” The Doctor answered. “It’s up to you, dear girl. But not until afterwards. Right now, eat your food. You need the carbohydrates. Then clear your mind of everything except that very challenging road ahead of you.”

She took his advice, though her silence on the drive up to Mile Seven covered any number of thoughts. The Doctor concentrated on driving and said nothing to influence her mind one way or another.

Her pleasure when she saw Ford McLaren waiting at the mustering tent was unmistakable, though, and she let him, as well as The Doctor, hug her before she put on her helmet and headed to the start line.

“Still a few people who think she shouldn’t be here,” The Doctor noted as they joined the spectators.

“She’ll show them,” McLaren answered.

Her progress beyond the first turn could be followed on a large tv screen and a smaller one with statistics scrolling continuously, but The Doctor suggested a better way.

“I brought the TARDIS, this time,” he said. “Let’s follow her up the mountain kn stealth mode and meet her at the finish line.”

They did just that, getting far better views than the cameras along the road, and were there, much to Ray’s surprise, to greet her once she reached parc ferme and received her official timing.

“Two minutes better than my practice time and way better than I had hoped,” she said delightedly. “I didn’t need to win, of course. Or prove anything to anyone else. I just had to beat my own expectations.”

“Absolutely,” The Doctor told her.

“No question,” McLaren added before both hugged her again and The Doctor fetched coffee and donuts, leaving them to a few brief moments of privacy.

Later, there was another party for the competitors. This time quite a few men tried to get Ray’s attention. She had, after all, come third in her class and set a new record for vintage bikes, which silenced all critics. Even so, she gave them all the cold shoulder.

Ford McLaren benefitted from that decision, dancing all but the last dance with her. This, a slow waltz, she reserved for The Doctor.

“Thank you, for everything,” she told him. “Including… not stopping me from following my own mind about.…”

The Doctor said nothing.

“He told me about the Time Agency and what the two of you got up to last night.”

“You’re ok with that? He was a bit worried. He worries a log, I think. A born worrier.”

“I’m ok. It means I didn’t have to lie to him about where I’m from, either. We talked about… keeping in touch. I was hoping you would know how to do that… TARDIS to Time Agent….”

“You don’t want to go to the fifty-first century with him?”

“I only met him two days ago. I’m not about to jump ship just like that. We can be friends. See how it goes. We could all go to the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo tomorrow and have a proper look at this beautiful countryside and… After we’re done, maybe we could give him a lift to the fifty-first century later in the week. If that’s all right.”

“That’s quite all right. It’s a very interesting century.”

“By the way,” Ray added. “Ford McLaren IS his real name. His dad runs a museum of ‘ancient’ motor vehicles. Twentieth century is ancient to him. And he named his son for his own obsession.”

“Well, that’s all right, then,” The Doctor admitted.