

*For my mother Margaret Ross who instilled in me that anything is possible.*

## THE SUNDIAL INN

By Stephen John Ross

### **Chapter 1. Present Day**

He traveled through a tube of memories. Tim had no control as the rounded walls that surrounded him flew by. Colored lights, countless voices, and sounds zipped past him. He could only discern a few words from a barely recognizable voice before another replaced it, followed by another. Tim felt a connection to these but had no time to concentrate on just one. Each moment that passed felt like a part of his life. The smell of cut grass from the backyard he tended as a boy. His first car followed by his father's funeral. Tim relived feelings and emotions from different stages in his life. Each briefly touched his soul, then disappeared as he moved forward. His peripheral vision captured bits and pieces of his past, indefinite and fractured. Tim's hands grasped the arms of the chair while his body pushed back into the seat like a jet pilot at take-off. As he went faster and faster, the steady hum of sounds became louder, and the lights shone brighter. Beads of sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes, but he could not blink or raise his hands to relieve the stinging. His head felt like it would explode, and his hands ached from grasping the chair even harder. He had little choice but to hang on for the ride. Then, suddenly . . . everything stopped! Darkness . . . silence. . . .

Like ascending to the surface of the water from a deep dive, he took a long gasp of air. He thrust his body to a standing position and back into reality. His hands thrust forward in the air as if still holding onto the armrests. His stinging eyes fought to adjust to the lighting. Pressing his hand to his brow, he made out people in seats facing away from him. They had all turned back now and were looking in his direction.

“Oh. . . . I’m so sorry, sir! Let me help you.” Tim felt the panic in the woman’s voice. He turned to his left and lowered his hand. A well-dressed woman frantically cleaned the shirt of a seated man using a small towel. An empty plastic cup and several ice cubes cluttered the floor beneath.

The man looked directly at Tim while she worked on his wet shirt. She turned toward Tim while cleaning off the man.

“Are you all right, sir?”

Tim’s mouth and eyes were now wide open. “What?” he replied, his mind still in the Sonic Tube of Thoughts. “Where am I?” he asked the flight attendant.

Tim saw her face twist in disbelief. “Sir, you’re not looking well. Can I get you some water?”

*I’m on a plane! Where’s Sara?*

Tim quickly looked left and right. “Where’s my wife?”

“Sir, you boarded in New Orleans by yourself. Nobody was with you.”

“What do you mean boarded in New Or— where are we going? Where is my wife?”

“We are en route to San Francisco.” She had a concerned look on her face. “Are you sure that you’re feeling all right?”

By now, everyone in the immediate area had turned toward him. He could feel their eyes on him. Judging him, but he didn't care. Tim spun completely around in a circle looking for Sara. He could not see her anywhere.

"I have to find my wife!"

"Sir, you're going to have to be seated. The captain has the seat belt sign on because of the turbulence." The flight attendant pointed to the illuminated sign overhead.

Tim didn't even hear her warning. He stepped into the aisle and hurried toward the front of the plane.

"Sara! Sara!"

"Sir! Please get back to your seat."

Tim frantically called out Sara's name while moving back down the aisle, looking left and right. Passengers stared at him in alarm, but he didn't care—only Sara mattered. Turbulence rocked the plane, causing Tim to stagger. Another jolt threw him sideways onto a seated passenger. She screamed and pushed him away. Tim struggled to his feet. "I'm sorry, I'm trying to find my wi—" Something heavy in his coat pocket slammed against his side. He pulled out a necklace. Attached to the chain hung a medallion with the image of . . . a sundial. *The Sundial.*

A sudden flash of images, sounds, and smells flickered through his memory. He waited with Sara at a bus stop. They both stepped off the bus into a parking lot under a full moon that gleamed high in the night sky. A beautiful building glowed beneath the moonlight and the countless spotlights surrounding it. The thick smell of flowers floated through the air. Music. A man in a white suit approaching. Then nothing.

*I have to find Sara! She could be hurt or . . .*

He dropped the necklace back into his pocket and started moving again.

Three more rows, and Tim stopped in his tracks and breathed a sigh of relief. At the window seat in a fully reclined position, Sara lay asleep. The seat beside her was empty, so Tim gently sat close. The grotesque expression on her sleeping face looked like nothing he had ever seen before.

*What was she dreaming?*

Tim gently tugged her arm and softly called her name. “Sara, Sara, wake up. I’m here. It’s me—” Sara let out a blood-curdling scream that sent Tim tumbling backward to the floor. Her terrifying yell triggered echoing cries of alarm throughout the cabin. Tim froze with inexplicable fear while the hair on the back of his neck bristled. *I have been to the depths of hell and back*, the scream seemed to say. Sara, now silent, rose from her seat, her body rigid. Her eyes bulged wide; a string of saliva dangled from her half-open mouth.

“Sara! Look at me.” She violently flung her head around to meet him with her hands up in a defensive position. Her eyes, wide as saucers, looked past him even though he stood two feet away. She then focused on Tim and came back to reality. Her body began to go limp. Tim caught her as she fell back into the seat. He eased her into it and sat down beside her.

Tim tried to comfort Sara by putting his hand on her knee. She knocked it off like she was swatting a fly away. Sara appeared extremely agitated.

“Tim, I . . . I don’t understand. What’s going on? Why are we on a plane? Where are we going?”

Sara’s scream now had everyone on the plane looking at them. The other passengers whispered to each other, but Tim couldn’t make out what they said. Sara rocked back and forth with her head in her hands. Turbulence jolted the plane again. It didn’t seem to faze her.

Tim made eye contact with a younger man sitting directly across from him, holding a newspaper.

“Hey, buddy . . . what day is it?” Tim quietly asked.

“Dude, you don’t even know what day it is? That’s awesome! New Orleans, man. Party central! I want to hang with you, man!”

Tim grabbed the newspaper from his hands. He searched for the date. *Tuesday, June 11! That can’t be! We just arrived in New Orleans on Saturday.*

Tim dropped the paper onto the man’s lap and looked up to see a woman—the flight attendant who had spoken to him earlier—trailed by a burly serious-looking man, making their way down the aisle toward them. The man approached, removed a badge from his pocket and growled in Tim’s ear. “Sir, I’m Andy Clark, a US sky marshal, and we need to talk now. What is going on here? Everyone on this plane is frightened, and I *can’t* have that.”

“It’s OK. I was just looking for my wife,” Tim assured the marshal while out of the corner of his eye he could see Sara with her head down, murmuring something inaudible past the shudders that racked her body.

“Are you his wife, ma’am?”

No reply.

“Ma’am, are you—” Sara turned to look at him. The side of her neck had been covered by her long, dark hair, but now Tim could clearly see black bruising around her neck. Clark recoiled slightly and glared at Tim before turning back to Sara. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Sara said in a soft voice, but Tim knew better. She could never look him in the eye when she lied.

“Is there anything that you want to tell me? What about that scream everyone heard?”

“My wife just had a bad dream, that’s all.”

“Why don’t we let the lady answer the questions?” The marshal glared at Tim.

Sara said nothing.

“Is this your husband, ma’am?” asked Clark.

“Yes.” Sara would not look up.

The sky marshal turned to Tim and stepped close to his ear. “I know your kind,” he said in a calm voice. The marshal’s face told a different story. *He’s furious at me.*

“That wasn’t me.” Tim pointed to Sara’s neck. “We don’t know how that happened.”

“Look, I don’t know what is going on with you two, and I don’t want to. We are going to land very soon, and what I need to know is that you’re not going to cause any more trouble on my flight.”

“I’m going to be sick!” Sara jerked out of her seat. The sky marshal jumped out of the way to let her pass. She used the backs of the seats for support as the plane continued to shudder through the air. Tim followed her down the aisle. Sara reached the washroom, flung open the door, and slammed it shut. The occupied sign flipped up, and the door locked. Tim put his ear to the door to hear Sara moaning.

“Sara?”

The unmistakable sound of retching stopped him from calling her name again. Tim turned around to see every soul on board ogling him. The marshal had returned to his seat but would not take his eyes off Tim. The toilet flushed, and water began running.

“Sara, are you OK? Please, let me in.” He knocked on the door.

“Get the fuck away from me, Tim!”

Sara's reaction startled him. Her tone and language, so unlike her, told him of the seriousness of the matter. He stopped knocking and leaned against the door, speaking softly despite his inner turmoil. "Sara, what's wrong?"

"What did you do to me, Tim? Drug me and fuck my ass?"

"Sara, you know I would *never* do that. I don't even remember us having sex." Until then, he'd had little time to think about his own body, but then he felt it. Raw and sore, just like he had felt when returning from their honeymoon. They acted like rabbits back then, but this time it felt different. A sudden memory of a beautiful woman came to Tim. She laughed while looking directly at him with an infectious smile. Tim could smell her perfume and feel the warmth of her touch. Erotic beyond words. Tim's smile faded as fast as it had appeared.

*Cold, darkness, eternity . . . death! What the hell was going on?!*

"Sara, I would never hurt you." Yet the memory still lingered.

"Tim, I'm bruised all over and spotting blood! I don't know what happened to me. . . ."

. Her voice faded into faint sobs.

"Would you please let me in?"

After a pause, the occupied sign flipped to vacant, and the door cracked open. Tim leaned in to see Sara staring in the mirror. The smell of hand soap and vomit made him grimace and turn away. When he turned back, he clearly saw the dark bruising around her neck. She sat down on the toilet seat and glanced up at him through tear-laden lashes. He could see it in her face. She had been abused.

"Jesus. . . . Sara, this wasn't me. Please, believe me."

"I know. I'm sorry. I don't understand what has happened. Why can't I remember anything?"

“When we land, I’m taking you to the hospital to get checked out. We can contact The Sundial, the hotel we went to, and figure this thing out. There has to be an explanation, and we will get to the bottom of it. Someone will pay for this.” Sara sat in a daze. The Sundial necklace dangled from her neck, but Tim noticed something missing.

“Sara, where’s your bracelet?”