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Time of Iniquity

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Jericho Quill Press

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First Edition

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To my mother and father –
in gratitude that they were not
the parents portrayed in this novel

CHAPTER ONE

Grey. Metallic. Two inches to a side. The box sat on the edge of the lectern pretending to be real, and in that pretense I saw the whole of my salvation. Not that I believed in the possibility of being saved.

In matter of fact, the box looked as much out of place in a philosophy classroom as I myself felt. From seven rows up in the gallery I couldn't see its details, only that it had a red push-button on top. But its potential . . . well, that very much belonged here, as such potentials are strictly a matter for philosophy.

The Professor walked slowly across behind the lectern. Afternoon sun spilling through the high windows irradiated his grey-white crewcut. "I'm quite serious," he said, his slight Scottish accent almost corrupted by the bass in it. "I do not claim to understand, I only state that it functions." His eyebrows raised in his "I dare you to dispute me" look. As usual, no one did.

He wasn't acting as much as teaching, although I'm never quite sure. He was heading for a point, and I had learned twenty years ago when I sat here as an undergraduate that, when Doctor Phillip Kendrick heads for a point, it can be a fantastic voyage, if you'll just wait patiently.

"There is doubt on your faces," he continued, standing now at the oak railing that separated the lecture floor from the forty-six graduate students. "Or is it a suspicion that your professor is a bit more irrational than usual today?" The obligatory, if shallow, laughter did not erase the hint of truth I felt might be in that statement.

"I assure you," he said, holding up his right hand as if to testify, "that I am completely sane, and completely sincere. What you see before you," he turned and took up the box again, "is a device for traveling through time."

When he'd said it the first time there had been a surprised stillness in the room. This time the reaction was more like a tolerant parent listening to a child's wild story, waiting for the nonsensical punch line.

Suddenly The Professor slapped the box down on the lectern again. "Very well," he said in a rush, "if it's proof you want, proof I'll give you. I'll push this button and disappear before your eyes, gone to another era!"

The Professor stared straight at us, eyes narrowed, looking to judge the thoughts behind each face. And as he stared, his index finger hovered defiantly over the small red button on the grey metallic box. His eyes locked on mine and a cold wind shot down my spine. Of *course* I knew it was an object lesson. Of *course* I knew he wouldn't disappear. Of *course* I knew there was no such thing as time travel. Yet the fiery-cold wind in his eyes blew the confidence straight out of my soul and I teetered on the edge of belief.

Suddenly he released his stare and let out a laugh that echoed off the oak paneling. Pulling his hand away from the box, he walked back to the center of the room. "No, I'll not be disappearing today," he said. "If I did, you'd all think it a splendid time to cut class."

We joined his laughter, relieved that his little game was over. We were wrong.

"I am still quite serious," he said. "But a debate about the possibilities of time travel is not what I planned for today. Rather, a question." He paced again, left arm behind his back, right hand stroking a salt-and-pepper beard. Two decades ago, when I was nineteen and knew everything, The Professor had seemed old to me. Now he seemed remarkably young, though he was flirting with retirement. Time hasn't changed him, but it has fought me. Lately I've felt like I'm down for the count.

"Presupposing that time travel were possible," The Professor continued, "and presupposing that you were fortunate enough to have access to a time travel device, my question to you is this: for what purpose would you use it?"

Now we could relax. We were once again on sound, theoretical ground and could grapple with some sound, meaningless questions. A young man at the far end of the gallery called out, "I'd travel forward about six years and get my Ph.D.!"

The professor laughed with us, but then said, "Sorry, not in the rules. You may only travel *back* in time, not forward."

"I'd go back and get a different haircut!" It was the blonde in the third row, Anne. A nurse I think. I'd had a cup of coffee with her one break and exchanged two-minute biographies. We all laughed now, everyone apparently sharing my opinion that her new hairstyle was a bit outdated.

The one-liners continued, with everyone trying to top everyone else. Of the extroverts, that is. The rest of us just sat and eavesdropped. "I'd go back and invest in Microsoft," said a balding man up front. "I'd go back to registration day and drop this class!" That from a young lady directly above me on the next row.

But an overweight man in his fifties, across the aisle and two rows down, bagged the trophy when he said, "I'd go back to the day before I met my wife and lock myself in the bathroom!"

The convulsive laughter that followed carried us over the crest of the hill we'd been climbing, and we felt content. We were ready to be serious. Which was good because, as the laughter died to snickering, The Professor said, "Now seriously, ladies and gentlemen, where would you go if you could travel anywhere in time you'd like?"

A few moments of silence followed, a few moments for me to reflect on the question, to notice once again how uncomfortable the hard wooden seats were, to doodle on my note pad because I had no intention of giving an answer. Finally, the extroverts began doing their job.

Anne, the nurse: "I guess I'd fill my bags with all the vaccine I

could carry and go back to every plague that's ever cursed a people." Sounded good to me. The first young man, Steve: "I'd go back and stop every tragedy from the nine-eleven back to Pearl Harbor." Good answer. "I'd go back and save Martin Luther King." It was a young African-American man in the front row.

But once again it was the overweight man in his mid-fifties, across the aisle and two rows down, who closed the discussion when he quietly, almost inaudibly, and terribly sincerely said, "I'd go back to the day before I met my wife and lock myself in the bathroom."

I could hear the creaking of the oak paneling in the silence that followed. We were embarrassed – that piercing, angry, enveloping embarrassment a group feels when someone has shared something too personal in public. At that moment, Professor Kendrick stepped in.

"You've all given perfectly charming answers," he said. "And most of them quite noble. But I rather suspect," he continued, drawing himself up and locking his eyes on ours once more, "that you are all lying." This had the intended effect on my curiosity. "All, that is, but Mr. Franklin, here," he added, pointing out the unhappy husband.

"Because I believe," The Professor continued, pacing, hands locked behind his back, eyes locked on our souls, "I believe that each and every one of you would do no such noble thing." His voice began to rise like a camp-meeting preacher, his hands marking his accusations with grand sweeps of his arms. "I believe that each and every one of you, given the opportunity to go back to any time in history, given the opportunity to heal entire civilizations, to alter tragic moments, to observe the wonders of the historical world," he paused, and continued in a near-whisper, "would turn away from every such opportunity, to go back into your own past, and change that which you wish you had never done."

And there it was. The point. The place to which he had been guiding us all hour. Once again The Professor had spun us around with our own pretensions and then hit us square between the eyes with a piercing truth. And it was, for me at least, most definitely truth. He had quite unknowingly slashed through all that I pretend to be and

bared the core of my soul, where are kept the secret regrets I hold. I wondered, for a moment, if the blood would show through my cardigan.

I willed the memories to stay where I had neatly tucked them, but they defied me. As they slid across my mind in frightful clarity I wished the grey metallic box really were a time-traveling device. I wanted to stand up, run to the front of that classroom, and push the button. I wanted to go back in time and erase what I wish had never been.

The Professor picked up the box and, for a moment, for one horrifying, insane moment, I thought that he had heard my private misery and was handing me the device. But he only held it, rotating it slowly.

"So, ladies and gentlemen," he said finally, "what will it be? What private miseries are you keeping?" My heart lurched at those words – *had* he been listening in? "How would you change your lives, your histories, your actions, if indeed I could send you back?"

He was into his lecture then, and would speak for another forty-five minutes. Our seminar was Topics in Philosophy and served no other purpose for me than to fulfill some credits for my master's degree. And that's about the *only* thing that could get me to sit on these hard wooden seats on a beautiful August afternoon when I could be doing anything else. Even as a teacher, summer school had never much appealed to me.

As always there was serious debate and, as always, we came away having no idea what The Professor really thought. His job was to make us think, not give us answers.

I caught only part of the discussion, though. My mind kept returning to that night when it had happened, the night of my regret. The scene played over and over, and over and over I played with the idea of what I might do to change it, if I really could go back.

The slap of seat bottoms springing vertical made me realize I had dazed through the last ten minutes of class. Slowly, deliberately, still deep in thought, I returned the utensils of education to my

briefcase: leather-bound notebook enclosing a yellow legal pad without a single note; gold-plated pen engraved with my initials – a gift from Maggie, my wife, when I started working toward my degree; and the soft-cover version of the philosophy anthology, the yellow “USED” sticker a fine compliment to my mood.

By the time I was ready to leave there were only two students left talking to The Professor. I waited quietly behind them. Mine was a personal question, not for the hearing of strangers.

When the two had gone, The Professor looked at me, silent, for a moment. "Thomas," he said without emotion, as if he had sifted through a stack of names and finally found the correct one. "You have a question?"

"Yes, Professor. I guess it's kind of a philosophical one." I felt foolish now.

The Professor smiled. "That works out well, since this is a philosophy class. What is it Thomas?"

"It goes back to our earlier discussion on time travel." What was I doing? "If one really could return to one's own past," even my sentences were mocking me now, "could one really effect any changes that would change one's future?" I felt the flush of embarrassment in my cheeks. I sounded like a love sonnet re-written in proper grammar.

"I guess that depends on what one had done in one's past that one felt needed changing."

He was toying with me. And I knew it. And I laughed. And so did he. All of which helped me relax. I shouldn't *need* to relax around The Professor; I've known him twenty years, been to his home a dozen times. Strike that. I've been to his house; I'm not sure I've ever been to his home. Either way, I shouldn't feel as intimidated as I do around him.

Still smiling, The Professor surveyed me with a casual curiosity. "You're troubled, Thomas," he said, more a statement than a guess. "And you're looking for relief. Been looking a long time, I should say."

Half of me wanted to yell "Yes!" while the other half wanted to deny it. I should be used to this by now, the way The Professor instantly dissects a person, then lays the pieces out for discussion. But I'm not used to it, and I had to fight my own defense mechanisms to admit he was right.

"That's pretty close to the truth," I said. My defense mechanisms hadn't surrendered unconditionally. "I guess I'm searching for an answer that I'm not sure even exists."

"But if it did exist, it does so in the past, is that it?"

I nodded. I wanted to scream out, "Of course that's it!" I wanted to tell him all about it and beg him to help me. But I only nodded.

The Professor thought for a moment, his fingers rubbing the brass lock on his leather attache'. He took a deep breath, then let it out sharply. "I'm not sure I can help you," he said. There was sympathy in his voice, sympathy with a touch of reality.

I nodded again, and let my eyes drop from his. "I wasn't really asking for help," I lied, then met his eyes again, "just pondering a philosophical question."

"I mean, Thomas, that I don't think anyone can help you except you. Only you can explore your past, and only you can make it fit in with your future."

"I guess that was my real question," I said with just a touch of self-pity. "How can I go back to what was and make it what I'd like it to be?"

His smile spread into a sympathetic grin and he pointed at the small grey box. "Push the button," he said.

I laughed a little, then sighed. "If only it were that easy."

He just kept looking at me. "Maybe it is," he said softly. There was a pause, then he finished latching his case and gathered his overcoat. "I must be going now, Thomas, my dinner will be waiting." He stopped and looked at me to make sure I understood he was sincere. "I truly wish I could give you some answers."

I thanked him, then he climbed the elongated stairway to the

exit in back. I wish you could give me some answers too, I thought. Then I decided, once again, there really was no answer for the past. Maybe I just needed to work on the future and make the best of it.

"Yup, Tom old boy," I said out loud in the empty room, "you've got to quit dreaming and get back to real life." And with that I gathered my things, gave the red button on the grey metallic box a playful tap, and climbed the stairs to the exit.

The History and Philosophy building on the campus of Benton University has both dignity and charm. Five stories tall plus a bell tower, rusty brick exterior, and oak paneled interior, it holds the line between antiquated and antique. Time was in this building. More time than I myself had seen. It enveloped anyone who entered, surrounding them not with history, but with today in the light of yesterday. It was a presence that demanded to be recognized.

Maybe it was this presence that wouldn't allow me to turn away from the past just yet. Despite the order I'd given myself back in Room 103, my thoughts kept returning to times past as my steps echoed down the marble of the Great Hall. Nor did those thoughts leave me alone once I was out the main entry and down the gauntlet of concrete lions.

Orange and brown and yellow maple leaves, dry and crackly under my feet, echoed my bitterness as I headed up the sidewalk. Time is unstoppable, they were telling the depths of my concentration. You cannot change what has been cast in time.

I continued along the route as I had a thousand times before. Five blocks west, two blocks south, just two doors from the University president's house, to a quiet, two-story, three-bedroom home where time once took a nasty turn. Or rather, it was my life that had taken a nasty turn. Time is only the preservative.

A deep breath of crisp air; maybe I can force the gloom away. I tried to take in the world around me, to realize life is bigger than one incident two years past. I even noticed with delight that they'd finally started remodeling the facade of the old Administration Building. I guess time can be fooled for a while, if you're smart enough.

– TIME OF INIQUITY –

Another block gone by and I quickened my step – the wind was beginning to tickle. I really must beat this depression, I told myself. I've a family to go home to, and they don't need to endure another evening of melancholy.

I stopped at the next intersection and waited for traffic to clear. Mine is not the worst problem in the world, I suppose, though it might win a prize for tenacity. But when a problem is yours alone, when it climbs on your shoulder and follows you everywhere, when it waits for you to wake up in the morning and tucks you in at night, then I think you're justified in seeing it a little out of perspective.

A restored '48 Buick passed and I hurried across the intersection. I claim to be Christian, and I suppose in the popular sense of things I am, though I'm also one who incessantly doubts the popular sense of things. I tried praying about the past. Even offered a reward for its capture. If there is a God, he doesn't take bribes.

I glanced ahead: one more block, a left turn, then I'd be out of this razor wind. The long shadow tripping off my feet meant the sun was on my back, but I didn't feel any warmth from it. I was passing Wendell's Drugs and moved closer to the building, hoping for a little relief. It didn't come.

Always waiting for crab to be on sale, I stole a quick glance at the Chadwith's Market reader board. Potatoes were on for twelve cents and pot roast was fifty-one cents a pound. No crab dinner this week. I sucked my head back down between the collars and pushed on.

Actually, I hadn't thought about it most of the day. The past, that is. Then The Professor had brought out his little box and unlocked the vault in my mind. Not his fault, of course. But if I can't change the past, I wish I could at least forget about it. Forgive and forget, they say. Humanly impossible.

Two girls ran past me, college students, no doubt. Trying to get someplace out of the wind, although with wool skirts down to their ankles they're probably warmer than I in my knit slacks.

Enough complaining, I told myself. Tonight's dinner will not

be a repeat . . .

Skirts down to their ankles? Pot roast at fifty-one cents a pound? A '48 Buick? Fall leaves and a cold wind?

I stopped abruptly and looked around. I could see only six cars, but every one of them was pre-1950. The street sign said this was the corner of Dexter and Pine, but my sanity argued: where's the 7-11? Since when did the coffee shop become a pool hall? And what happened to the other half of Chadwith's building?

Irrational images began tumbling through my head, images of H.G. Wells, and Alfred Einstein, and The Professor's small metal box with the innocent red button.

Seconds later I entered the first stage of what I later dubbed The Five Reactionary Stages Upon Discovering You've Unexpectedly Gone Back In Time. Standing in the middle of the sidewalk, in a brisk autumn wind, briefcase in hand, headed home for dinner, I had one overwhelming, irresistible desire . . .

"Newspaper!" I gasped aloud. "Where's a newspaper?"

In Hollywood, at least, the sure-fire test for determining the date is to look at a copy of today's daily. It's as if we've entrusted the newspaper publishers of the world with the job of keeping our days in order. I stumbled back to Wendell's Discount Drug Emporium – which, now that I looked, was not Wendell's Discount Drug Emporium at all but Wendell's Family Pharmacy – to buy a paper.

I expected the quiet "whoosh" of the automatic doors, but slick aluminum had been replaced by bulky wood. I pulled on the brass door handle and entered the medicinal warmth of the pharmacy. I stood there for a moment, looking at shelves of medicines and bandages and crutches, and felt a little nauseous. It was a pharmacy. A *real* pharmacy. No sporting goods section, no greeting card section, no automotive section. No housewares or electronics or toys. Not even a cosmetic counter. I've probably been to Wendell's more than the pharmacist, but this was not Wendell's. The counter wasn't even in the right place.

"Can I help you?" It was a man I didn't recognize, standing

behind the cash register. Pretending to be the pharmacist, no doubt. Probably a drug addict. I'd walked into the middle of an armed robbery, I was sure. I didn't let that grandfatherly face and gentle smile fool me.

"I just came in for a paper," I said, still suspicious. He took my quarter and gave me twenty-two cents change. Not turning my back, I edged over to the newsstand and picked up the top paper. Then I entered the second of the Five Reactionary Stages Upon Discovering You've Unexpectedly Gone Back In Time. The date was September 8th, 1948. I promptly fainted.

Men don't like to say they've fainted. "I blacked out" is the accepted terminology for modern macho man. But what I did on that hard pharmacy floor was faint. My skin went cold, my head went light, the world went dark, and I went down like a swooning teenage girl in . . . well . . . in 1948.

A few moments later I thought Maggie was cleaning the kitchen floors, but woke to find the stranger – all right, I'll admit he was the pharmacist – holding a broken tube of ammonia under my nose.

"You fainted," he said.

"Blacked out," I corrected.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Just fine," I answered.

Stage Three of the Five Stages is to ask the nearest person what year this is, whereupon they think you're an escaped asylum patient and call the police, whereupon you end up in a chase scene through dark alleys running for your life. Having seen enough movies like this to know what was coming, I jumped right over Stage Three and went directly to Stage Four.

"So, what do you think of the president?" I asked the pharmacist, as he helped me into a straight-backed chair. If he thought that a strange question from a man who had just fainted – uh, blacked out – he certainly didn't show it.

"Truman's not a bad old boy," he said.

Truman. Harry S. 33rd president of the United States. More to the point, *current* president of the United States. What in the name of little grey boxes was going on here?

"What do *you* think?" the pharmacist asked.

"About what?" I answered.

"Truman!" he said.

"Oh," I said. Then after a pause, "Not a bad old boy."

The pharmacist – Wendell was his name – asked if I'd be okay and I said sure, and that I just wanted to sit and read my paper for a few minutes. He said that was fine and left me alone. I sure wish he hadn't done that. The more I read, the more panic I felt.

"Truman To Take Trip West - Expects Second Honeymoon with Congress," the headline said. So he really was president. The Republicans were planning a "short, hard hitting campaign with alert watching for any Truman blunders." I guess times haven't really changed that much.

The Marshall Plan was in effect. Stalin met with Western leaders over the Berlin problem and the airlift. The congressional Un-American Activities Committee was vowing to "stop the radicals, and stop them now!" Grapes were fifteen cents a pound.

The want ads showed separate columns for "Male Help Wanted" and "Female Help Wanted." A six-pack of Coke cost twenty-five cents. Even Dagwood took a jab at me. He was complaining because Alexander wanted two dollars to take his girlfriend on a date. Two lousy dollars.

I lowered the paper, let go the last of my disbelief, and entered Stage Five. "I've got to get back!" I whispered.

The sky was black as I bolted from the pharmacy. I hadn't noticed the old-fashioned streetlights before. The wind was really whipping now – and now made sense, it being September and all – but it was coming from behind. I was headed back to the campus.

I waited impatiently for traffic – a Nash, a '43 Ford, and something called a Crosley. What few men were out all wore fedoras. A Bell Telephone billboard bragged that long distance calls could now

go through in about two minutes, most of them while-you-wait. Traffic cleared and I ran.

Finally, the campus. Almost home. By now it didn't surprise me to discover that the Administration Building wasn't being remodeled. It was just being built.

Just like the day after my wedding when it suddenly struck me that "I'm married!" terror latched onto my ribcage as it fully struck me that "I'm in 1948!" What if the Philosophy building is locked, I thought? What if the janitor threw out the time box thing? What if it didn't work?

I ran past the concrete lions, up the brick stairway, and through the door. Oh, it wasn't locked, I thought only afterwards. My steps echoed down the marble of the Great Hall. I threw open the doors to Room 103 and scrambled for the light switch. The noisy fluorescents groaned in protest, but cast their greenish tinge across the room, and I sighed.

The grey metallic box, two inches to a side, with a red pushbutton on top, was still sitting on the lectern.

And it was real.

Slowly now, afraid to go forward but afraid not to, eyes fixed solidly on the demon that had interrupted my life, I stepped down the stairs toward the front of the room. I stood staring at it and saw for the first time a switch next to the red button. The switch was leaning toward the word "Backward."

I couldn't believe that any part of this was possible. Now back inside the confines of the familiar, I wasn't sure any of it was real.

But, no, it wasn't really familiar after all. As I looked around I saw how new and fresh everything was. Fresh paint on the stucco walls, fresh varnish on the oak railings and trim, fresh . . . ambience. This wasn't the place I knew. It was something odd, something foreign. So I flipped the switch toward the word "Forward."

Then I pushed the button.

Instantly, I knew. Instantly everything in the room grew old, dusty, used. *Now* it was familiar.

– TIME OF INIQUITY –

I gently placed the box in my briefcase, making sure I didn't accidentally push the button, then left the building.

Professor Kendrick lives three blocks from the campus, in the opposite direction from my home. I stormed the three blocks in two minutes, as hot under the collar as the August breeze at my back. Without pausing or even slowing down I marched up the steps to his Victorian porch and punched the doorbell.

The door opened and The Professor stood there behind the screen door, half a smile on his face.

"Well, Thomas," he said without the least bit of surprise. "I was wondering what time you'd arrive."