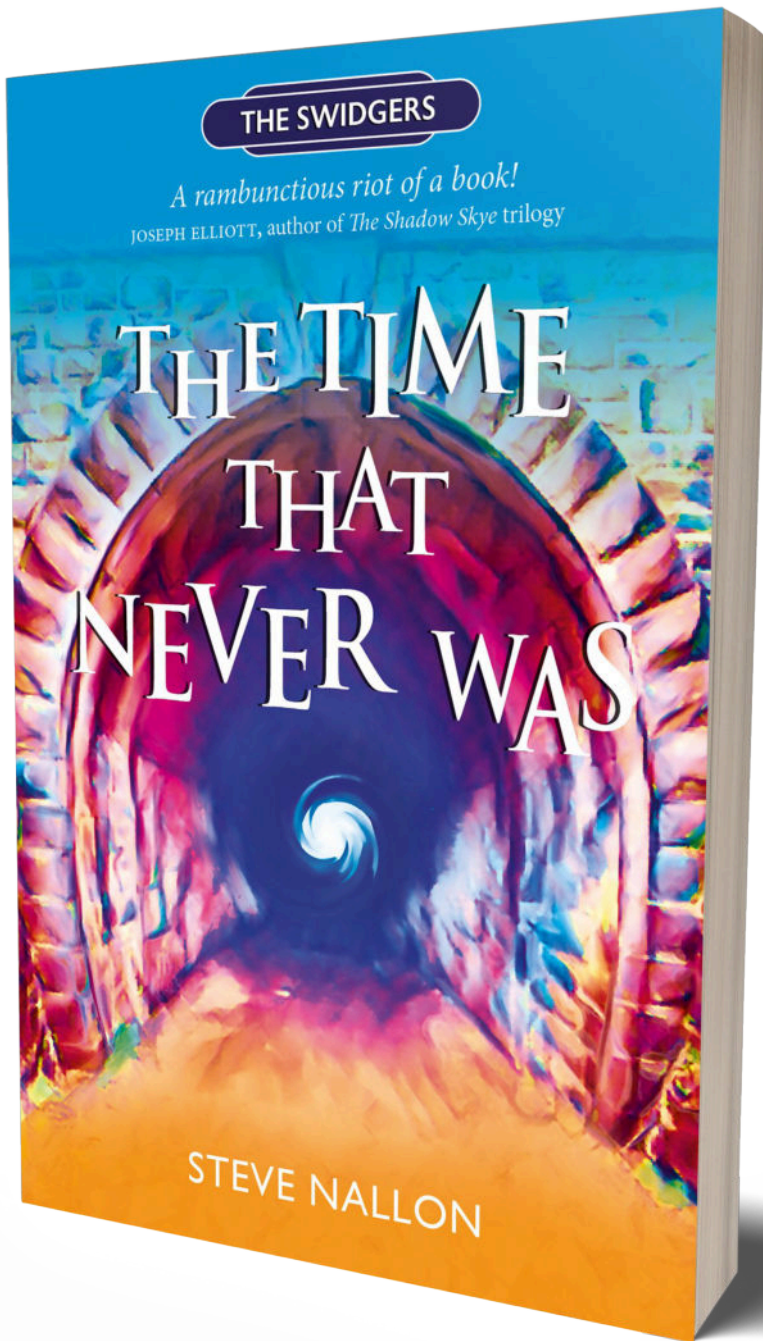


THE SWIDGERS

A rambunctious riot of a book!
JOSEPH ELLIOTT, author of *The Shadow Skye* trilogy

THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS

STEVE NALLON



CHAPTER ONE

Saving the Man

LIKE LIGHTNING. SO sharp, fierce and bright it blinded. And it's that flash where I must begin my story. I couldn't tell at first where it came from... except I knew, somehow, it wasn't the sky...

I was there that Saturday because, for me, a busy street is better than my empty house. Why the house was empty, well, that can wait. It's not important anyhow. All that mattered that sunny morning was – *The Man*.

I should say to you straightaway that our kind usually do what we do and then move on. Yet that day, something made me keep on following. Even after my task was complete. And that one thought changed everything. My whole life. And yours, too.

This is what happened. I was standing outside the Crossed Keys pub. By the door. Well, they'd never let me into the bar. Not then. Too young. Besides, by the door is a good place to wait. So many people passing by, so many lives to change.

The High Street in Chipping Barnet is on a hill and the Crossed Keys pub is about halfway between the underground station at the bottom and the old church at the top. It's a steep walk up and people normally take it slowly but when I saw The Man, he'd already passed the Post Office. Getting faster and faster with every step. That pounding stride men have when they're late for something. Yes, it's the ones who rush who can be the worst.

I didn't know when the harm would come or what it would be. We never do. But I did know it was vital to stop *The Man* and *The Accident* coming together in *Time*. You see, that is what our kind do. We change Timepaths. We hinder. Block. Impede.

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Or simply just get in your way. And it's those precious seconds that will save you from whatever danger is ahead. That is the gift our kind offer humans. Or try to.

Oh, but this guy – *The Man* – is quick. Only a few steps away now. I need to stop him before it happens.

But what delay to use?

Dropped wallet?

No, left that back at the empty house.

Shoelaces undone?

Not an option. Today I'm wearing slip-ons. And I'm only a boy, so can't ask for a light. Not that I smoke or ever would.

Oh no, he's about to pass me.

Yeah, there he goes.

But what's that he's carrying across his shoulders? A holdall? I hadn't noticed it before. Looks heavy. A tool bag, I think. I'm guessing he's on his way to work. Even on a Saturday morning.

Oh, but I should've stopped him by now.

Yes, I could just bump into him but the pavement's bursting with people and it's his Timepath alone I must alter, no one else's.

I walk close behind him, matching his every step. That tool bag of his has slipped a bit down his back and now I can see a wooden handle sticking out. A hammer, I suppose. No, too heavy. He'd feel me take it. And our kind must avoid being noticed. What else is there? Pieces of copper pipe. He's a plumber, I guess.

Wait... is that a metal file?

Yeah, that would work. He'd hear that when it hit the ground.

But do it quick, William, do it quick. Whatever is about to happen to The Man could happen any second.

I'm just a pace behind him. I fix my eyes on that metal file sticking out of his holdall. Tricky, but possible. Don't think he'll be able to tell it was me, not with so many distractions.

Just ahead there's someone in a pink rhino costume, collecting with a charity bucket. Hah! My plumber does a side-step to avoid it. But that's good because now I have a chance to reach inside.

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Yeah, I was right, it's rough and scratchy. A workman's file. I carefully pull it away with my fingers and then gently let it drop to the pavement.

My idea was good. The Man should have heard it clang and so turned back to pick it up. Those seconds would have been enough. But that never happened because, right at the wrong moment, a car blasted its horn and the clang was drowned out.

Why do humans rush so much? Always battling against Time. Yes, there he goes, marching on.

I've said it's best if our kind don't draw too much attention to ourselves, but there are moments when we have no choice. Like right now.

'Hey, Mister!' I call. 'You've dropped something.'

My plumber half turns his head but still carries on walking, so I pick it up and shout, 'This metal file. It fell out your bag!'

Has he heard me? Yes, he's stopped.

At last, The Man's Timepath has been altered.

'Thanks, mate!'

Australian. I didn't expect that. Not sure why.

Of course, it would have been better if he had come to me – extra seconds always help – but no, he was one of those that just stood there so it was up to me to walk up the hill and hand the file over.

'Life of their own, these,' said the Aussie. 'Second one gone walkabout this week.'

I watched as my plumber put his metal file securely back in his bag.

'Cheers, kid,' he said. And with that, he was on his way up the hill again.

Well, that should have been it. Timeline changed. Task complete. Move on. Yet that day my eyes stayed on him and I saw what I hoped I would not see: he started to run.

Oh no, The Man was trying to make up the Time he'd lost. The precious seconds I'd just given him.

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This sometimes happens. But you accept it. You've done what you had to do and should do no more. That's just the way things are. If The Man wishes to catch up with Time, then so be it. He doesn't know that today Time will not be his friend. Nor that those precious seconds I gave him would have saved his life –

Hang on a second... What was that? Save his life! Where did that thought come from? And how could I know? Because our kind never know.

This isn't right. Not right at all. We change Timepaths, but to feel what will happen next – the fate we're saving you from – impossible. Never had I had such thoughts before. Yet now I did. Somehow, I knew.

The Man is running to his death.

What to do? Turn and go? But how can I? I mean, this a human life at stake. Yet to run after him would go against everything I'd ever done before.

So, what would it be, up the hill or down? Scurry away or follow? Well, sometimes in life there never really is a choice.

As soon as I chased after him, I knew in that moment that my world would never be the same again. I couldn't tell you why. Just felt it inside. I could not yet know the battles I would live through or the horrors I would witness. Nor how I would become somebody I never expected to be. Perhaps you think I'm making too much of such a moment, but I tell you, I'm not, because, as my story will reveal – *just one thought can change everything.*

I'm tall for my age, not as fit like some of the lads at school, but I can run fast when I need to. As I do now.

Bit too quick. Nearly knock over a small boy. Oh, but he's too busy pretending to shoot his daddy with a toy pistol so doesn't see me. I have to swerve though, and when I do, I bump into the postman with his sack of letters. He does see me. And what a strange look I get.

As I dash and dart among the shoppers, I catch sight of my plumber. He's now nearing the top of the hill where there's a

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bend in the road and the street turns. Opposite is the old church, looking grey and tired. Along its wall are roadworks with men in yellow hats digging a deep trench. Good, it's blocked off that side, plus the temporary traffic lights are now on green, which means my plumber can't cross.

Yes, I'm right. My Man has had to stop by the coffee shop.

But wait, maybe this is where whatever it is will happen.

I feel something... and it's getting stronger... stronger than anything I've sensed before. Oh no! Death is right there waiting for him. *But how will it happen?* No, no, I can't sense that yet...

Not that I can do anything about it because I'm still a bit of a distance from The Man. Plus there's a crowd of people in the way.

I try and ease myself between the Saturday shoppers who, like him, are waiting for those lights to change. And as I do, I glance into the coffee shop full of Saturday mums and dads and their playful toddlers. An old lady in a big purple hat with her back to me moves a pram away from the door so she can leave.

But what I see stops me in my tracks. A reflection in the coffee shop front window. The glass is slightly angled so the window acts like a mirror and what it reflects isn't so much the church opposite, but its roof and the sky above, bright and open. And right now something is hurtling down through the air, heading straight towards the church. It's big. A rock? No, it's gleaming white with jagged edges. More like a crystal.

Then I realise – ice! A huge boulder of ice. And it's about to hit the church roof.

What's strange, as I think back now, is that it seemed as if my mind's eye were witness to what would happen even before it struck. I could see it all – the crystalline ice would pierce a hole in the slates as if it were a bullet. The wound would be deep, but there'd be no yawning gash, for the hit would be precise and exact. Almost as if the ice had known all along the job it had to do.

Someone I was yet to meet would often tell me that all human life was at the mercy of the next tile that fell. Ah, but you must

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wait to hear from her. Yet she was right. *Chance is everywhere.*

I now spin around from that reflection in the coffee shop window and see the impact of the ice on the church roof for real. The roof tiles are already falling everywhere and the workmen below are forced to clamber out of their trench. Those yellow hats won't be enough to save them. In the scramble, a workman knocks over a sign that says: DANGER: EXPOSED ELECTRICAL CABLES.

But what happened next, I did not foresee, for from the sky now comes a huge boulder that strikes the tarmac right in front of me, scattering ice like diamonds.

There's screaming all around. From a mother with an already crying child. From a little girl who, without thought, lets go of her balloon. From a man too drunk even to know why he is even screaming. The postman I bumped into earlier now stands beside me. He doesn't scream, just stares ahead, a letter yet to be delivered in his hand.

People don't know where to turn. And nor do I, but through the many cries I hear something only I could. Another strike of ice. Smaller than the first two but with it comes danger... No, more than danger: *Death.*

I can feel it. The Man is about to die and only I can save him.

CHAPTER TWO

The First Attack

THE STRIKE FROM the sky on the church roof had startled everyone and the crash onto the tarmacked road brought panic, but in the commotion no one but me had heard that third hit of ice on the roof of the coffee shop. And that was the moment I knew it would be a falling tile from that roof above us that would kill The Man. For it would land exactly where The Man was standing. Where he is will be where he'll die.

Without thought, just the instinct that makes us who we are, I grab at his tool bag and pull it towards me. The Australian is strong and fit, but that unexpected tug does what it was meant to do. He loses his balance and falls backwards. A split second later the tile flies by, passing before his eyes like the blade of a guillotine. The grey tile then crashes onto the hard Yorkstone paving and shatters into a dozen harmless fragments.

And all my plumber says is, 'Jeez!'

Well, he was an Aussie. So that was that. My job, I thought, was finally done. I could walk away and that would be that. Oh, but how wrong I was. For in truth, a whole new life was about to begin.

You see, in the reflection of the window, I saw another loosened tile on the church roof beginning to pull itself away. Most of the others had landed harmlessly on a pile of rubble nearby, yet, as this last one slid over the ridge of the roof, it was as if it already knew its target, for it shot through the air, pointing like an arrow with its aim in sight. And, as it disappeared into the trench, a cold wave of fear washed over me.

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It was then it happened.

That flash. Blinding. Penetrating. Like lightning. Only... not lightning.

Something more powerful. Something somehow released. And with that burst of light, came a menacing noise, like the cracking of a whip.

My eyes adjusted. It was then I realised. That strange and frightening light just now hadn't come from the sky. No, its genesis was that dugout pit beside the church.

Creeping and threatening, out from that hollow ground emerged two lengths of electrical cable, spewing sparks. Each had a severed end like the mouth of a snake and the flares spat out were not white and pure but green and vicious. These cables, muddied orange in colour, now twisted and curled – *as if alive!* Not really cables at all but two venomous vipers in battle.

One rose high in the air and struck its coiled twin down with a blistering bolt, but its foe fought back with its own strike and once more they were evenly matched. The first rose up high again and then hit its rival with such a mighty blast that it fell back, shaken and wounded. The attacker then moved in for the kill, with a vicious bolt cracking through its opponent's head. The victor now raised itself higher, twisting this way and that, as if on the lookout for fresh prey.

The cable snake grew tall and lifted itself high above us all. It was clearly able to strike out at any moment and in any direction, and so much so, that those nearby could do nothing but watch in helpless desperation. Among them, that postman, still gripping his letter, and the little girl who had lost her balloon. Only now she was terrified.

'Whaaaah! Wah!' she cries.

Don't do that, I think, or the serpent will notice you.

Too late, it has, for it now moves towards her, spitting venom.

'Ahhssss! Ahhhsss! Ahaaarrssssshhhrrrr!'

The serpent's mouth widens, as if ravenous and ready to kill.

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Is the viper about to strike?

Yes, it is! I turn away in horror. And yet again I see it all in the reflection of the coffee shop window. The cable, snake, or whatever it was, strikes and in an instant the little girl becomes no more than charred and blackened cinders.

I feel a deep empty pain within me, the like of which I have never lived before. A dark shadow spreads far and wide that seems to last beyond forever.

But then everything suddenly stopped. And I mean, really stopped. No noise, no movement. Not from anywhere. Not from anyone. It was as if people all around me had become cast in fear like statues.

I then turned away from the coffee shop window, but as I did, the world came alive again – and there was the little girl. Living and breathing!

How to explain the impossible? Had Time somehow moved backwards? Or had what I'd seen in the window reflection been some sort of a vision?

But there was no time to make sense of it, for the cable snake was already on the move. After a bend and a stretch, it began to advance in my direction, with its head pointing straight at me. Only then it began to swivel its neck, as if examining and curious.

All of a sudden, it turned away and fixed its glare instead on the postman who, without thought for himself, now grabbed the little girl and flung her behind him. She screamed and screamed and screamed some more but at least now seemed safe from further harm. The postman then took his sack from his shoulders and threw it to the pavement. He opened his arms wide as if to say to the devouring monster, 'Take me, not the child!'

The cable snake swung its head from side to side, as if, this time, deciding what to do next. 'Will I? Won't I?', it appeared to be thinking. It then stretched itself to full height – and spat out a vile green blast of light.

Again, I spun about in fear, for again, I couldn't watch. Yet once

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more I saw what was happening in that strange window mirror of the coffee shop. The poor postman – not old, not young, nor thin, nor fat, just, I thought, an ordinary everyday man – was no match for that flashing rod of lightning. It pierced his chest with a strike so powerful I could hear bones break. Scorched and seared, his body then suddenly splattered into a mass of burning red and black.

In that moment it was not pain or grief I felt but a strange absence. A loss of something not yet understood. And then once more, everything froze. There, right in front of me, was the exploding body of the postman, suspended in mid-air. The world again had become a landscape of petrified silence.

What was happening? Had the minutes and seconds somehow – I don't know – stopped? Or was I in some sort of Circle of Time?

I was so confused, I didn't know what to think. The reflections in the coffee shop window couldn't be true, yet they felt so real. None of this was happening and yet it was. All I knew for sure was that never had I been so afraid.

Perhaps, I thought, if I close my eyes it'll go away.

So I do. But now I feel an unearthly bitter cold more frightening than whatever was in front of me. I open them again and turn from the window.

The impossible has happened once more. The postman, back on his feet and alive. The little girl, still there, and still screaming.

The only way I can describe all this is that it was as if *The Now*, the moment we live in, was ever changing. As if Time itself was somehow shifting between *What Is* and *What Could Be*. At least that's what I thought. I wish I could explain it better, but I can't. What I can tell you is it felt like the beginning of madness.

Then I sensed it. The way our kind do. Something truly terrible was about to happen...

Oh no... was it my own life that was about to end?

Would the next strike be my *Now*? Not the little girl's, not the postman's. Mine. If I'm struck down there'll be no coming back for me. Better that way, I think, because it is for the human

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world that our kind exist. Yes, I might look like a boy, a young lad you might see every day, but I am not what I seem. Besides, my short life has been lived unnoticed and unwanted. There's little to leave behind. The house I left this morning was – and always is – empty. Loveless, too. Few will miss my passing.

And so I shut my eyes again and accept my fate. I then sense the snake coming nearer and nearer.

Oh, it's close, so very close!

Yet nothing happens. I open my eyes. The snake pulls away. I watch as it jerks its head side to side then up and down.

What's it doing? It's almost like it's mocking me. Laughing even.

That head now twists itself towards the mother and her crying child, then back to the postman, as if to say, 'I can take her if I like. Or him.'

But then it stills. It has decided. The cable snake rises high and lurches back upon itself. And strikes! It's scarred and molten mouth flies past my head to attack whoever stands behind me. I turn.

It is The Man! The plumber.

But as look again I see the snake hasn't aimed at his body – more his bag of metal tools. There's a sudden blazing green light as the snake's mouth hits its target. The canvass bag explodes in incandescent flames. The plumber is thrown back by the shock.

I reach out to help, and for all I know I do touch him, but I feel nothing except a tingle as he speeds by. His body lands on the Yorkstone slabs. Is he alive or dead? I cannot tell. Is it pain or loss I feel? Neither. Just defeat. Somehow, I've been tricked.

Just for a moment I have hope. Perhaps, I think, Time will shift once more and the *Now* will change again and I will see the plumber back on his feet as I had with the postman and the little girl.

But that *Now* does not happen. And Time moves on.

The dirty coil has done its worst and it slowly drops to the earth. Its severed end lands where the ice had fallen on the road. Sparks fly, briefly, as it makes contact with the melting water. And then it seems to die. No more a snake, just a grubby, muddy orange cable.

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Then – *SMACK!*

A hit. Like one almighty punch. Something heavy landing on my head. A yellow hat comes running towards me. No, two yellow hats. I blink.

There's something in my eye. A thick, blurry crimson. I wipe my face. My hands are red. Blood? I fall. And as I do, I wonder, 'Will anyone even come to my funeral?'

And with that final thought the blurry crimson fades and is replaced by blackness.

A SWIDGER TIME ADVENTURE

The Time That Never Was

Book One in the Series

STEVE NALLON



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