

Gigging

**MICK
BEATLE**

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Prologue

Monday 14 August 1978

The old cellar was clean and empty, though a subtle tang of damp lingered in the air like sour wine. The man living in the house had recently whitewashed its four brick walls, so when the late evening sun streamed vibrantly through the street-level window, the pastel white surfaces transformed into warm sheets of late summer gold.

As daylight gradually faded, an unwelcome chill settled in the air. If there had been any living creatures in this underground room, they would soon see their exhausted breath condense into mist as it escaped the comforting warmth of their bodies. But there was no life down here; the cellar was completely barren. The man had recently cleansed and sterilised the entire space in a systematic ritual that he would repeat weekly for the next twenty years.

In the centre of the room stood an old stone workbench, crafted from an imposing and immovable slab of locally sourced granite, over three inches thick. Short walls constructed of heavy brick supported the solid oblong work surface on three of its four sides, mirroring those that comprised the rest of the large old Victorian semi-detached above. The man had covered the floor with a gaudy threadbare carpet; its once grand orange and claret leaf-patterned design proudly adorned the upstairs dining room before he condemned it to decay as a makeshift

cover for the cellar's unwelcoming stone floor. He had further covered this with clear plastic sheeting, neatly taped into place where it met the walls and the base of the workbench, creating an opaque sterile mask.

The man had lived alone in the house for nearly thirty years after inheriting the property following the untimely death of his mother. Now approaching his fifties, he had spent most of his life in solitude, choosing to remain reclusive. The theories he developed and his experiences during his mother's lifetime left him with little time or patience for familiarity or friendships. Much like Peter on the road to Damascus, the man had undergone a profound enlightenment that altered his perceptions of reality and what was truly important to him.

Now, he had only one goal.

Like the cellar, the rest of the house was empty. The man had disappeared early that afternoon, securely locking away his secrets within the rundown old building as he left. He might have been conducting research at the local library or sifting through the waste of the nearby university or polytechnic, trying to salvage equipment to commence his work. He could even be offering his homemade amphetamines and quaaludes to local students or the street-corner Mod contingent to help finance his ambitious project. Wherever he was, he knew that the time to begin his work was upon him. When he returned to the house later that day, the man would meticulously record in his log exactly how long he had been gone.

In the dying velveteen light of dusk, a box materialised on top of the stone table. Its preformed, moulded plastic shape remained unusual, despite the advances in plastic technology during the late 1960s. The cold, clinical surface of the polymer neither reflected nor absorbed the waning autumn sunlight; instead, it sat dully, shrouded in its cooling iridescent glow.

In the darkened interior of the cage, a creature stirred. Pressing itself against the back of the box, it sought refuge in the shadows. But, as its instinct to escape intensified, it reached a long black-and-white furred leg through the metal grating at the front and clawed frantically at the surface of the table. A pair of fear-filled amber eyes peered out from the darkness, glimmering in the twilight like two warm coals. The cat searched desperately for a way to take flight, meowing helplessly in the hope of attracting a rescuer. It seemed misplaced, anxious, and

confused; it had lost control of its bladder, and the delicate yet unpleasant scent of cat urine mingled swiftly with the more potent aroma of damp from the walls.

At that moment, there was no one who could help; only time could aid the cat in its escape. Suddenly, as the last rays of the setting sun slipped behind the neighbouring rooftops and a vespertine darkness enveloped the room, the cat and the box were gone.