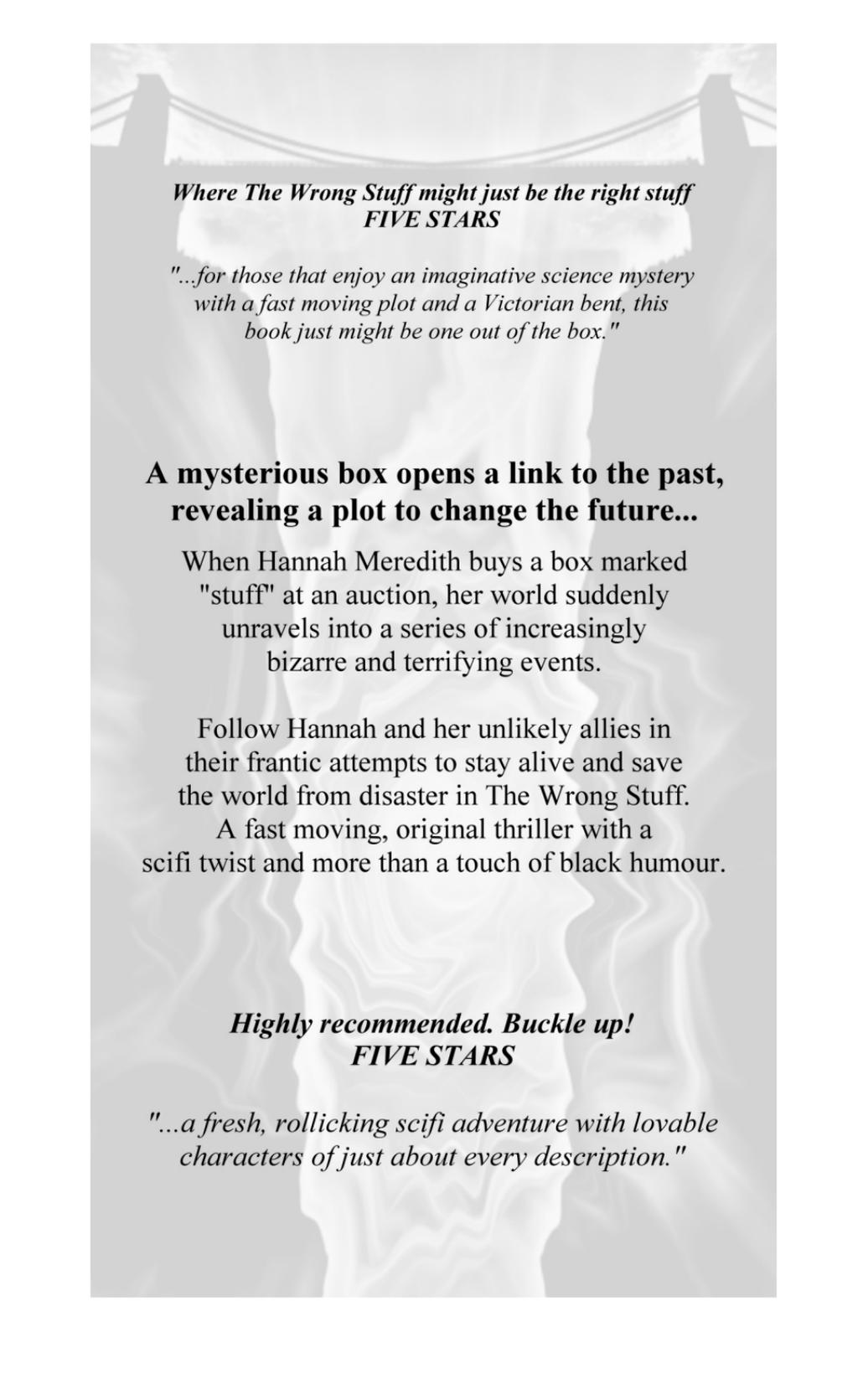




The
Wrong
Stuff

Guy Thair



Where The Wrong Stuff might just be the right stuff
FIVE STARS

"...for those that enjoy an imaginative science mystery with a fast moving plot and a Victorian bent, this book just might be one out of the box."

**A mysterious box opens a link to the past,
revealing a plot to change the future...**

When Hannah Meredith buys a box marked "stuff" at an auction, her world suddenly unravels into a series of increasingly bizarre and terrifying events.

Follow Hannah and her unlikely allies in their frantic attempts to stay alive and save the world from disaster in *The Wrong Stuff*.

A fast moving, original thriller with a scifi twist and more than a touch of black humour.

Highly recommended. Buckle up!
FIVE STARS

"...a fresh, rollicking scifi adventure with lovable characters of just about every description."

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For my wife, Rhonda.
Who has always said nice things about my writing,
even when she didn't have to.

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1

{ A New Aquisition

Ever since her husband died five years before, leaving her a considerable but not exorbitant inheritance, Hannah Meredith developed a love for going to blind auctions. Just the thought of digging through piles of assorted junk and miscellany made her heart race. There was something almost magical about buying a mysterious, sealed box for a few quid and tearing it open to see if there were unrecognized treasures inside.

Of course, she wasn't usually that lucky. Mostly she found third-rate silverware, cracked and faded crockery, dusty electrical components, and obscure mechanical spare parts or, if you were really lucky, maybe some half-decent antique jewelry or a not totally, dreadful painting.

She was never going to make a living from her lucky-dip bidding, but Hannah wasn't ready to give up hope just yet. The Big Score might be the very next lot that went under the hammer, then how bad would she feel?

No, she felt perfectly justified in spending a hundred pounds or so every couple of months. It was hardly an extravagance after all, and she sold most of the items she had no use for online and at the garage sales she held twice a year to make way for new purchases.

The latest Aladdin's cave of dubious delights was an auction, only recently opened, in the upstairs room of a pub in a nearby village. She'd already been to three others this month, (usually her limit) so she initially resisted the temptation. But the closer the time came, the greater the feeling grew she would be missing out on something special. By the time auction day arrived, there was no question of her not going, convinced her fortune awaited, under the taped-down flaps of some anonymous cardboard box.

Hannah arrived early at the pub; a quaint, low-ceilinged place with a roaring fire in the hearth and walls covered in hunting paraphernalia and old black and white photographs of country life in days gone by. She bought herself a drink and wandered around the two small bars, inspecting the memorabilia of a community that probably had not changed all that much in two hundred years.

After a while, she noticed people beginning to arrive and head for the stairs in the back corner of the pub, so she drifted over until she could hear muted conversations in the room on the floor above.

“...some interesting items...”

“...going to raise serious money with those...”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen one as fine as this...”

Casually strolling over to the bar, she finished her drink and placed the empty glass on the oak counter, before turning to follow two more new arrivals up the stairs.

The atmosphere in the large open room was a strange mix of restrained excitement and almost spiritual reverence. Small groups of people gathered in tight circles, voices barely raised above a whisper, scattered around the sparsely furnished room.

Nobody even registered Hannah’s existence, let alone approached or spoke to her. Glancing around, she made for the largest, least crowded table in the center of the room, which seemed to attract only the merest of uninterested glances from most of the punters as they drifted around, eyeing the sale items and whispering to each other.

Inwardly pleased when she saw the battered selection of boxes on the table, with things like Bureau, Misc, and Basement written in marker, thinking there might be some surprises in those.

Then she saw the box she immediately, shockingly knew with absolute certainty she was going to buy. It was a medium sized box, the cardboard visibly older than most of the other boxes Hannah could see, but otherwise not remarkable in any way.

And on the side, in the same scrawl that marked the rest, one word, Stuff.

That was all. Not very descriptive, but then, that was the thrill, wasn't it? The not knowing was what made it exciting.

She suddenly became aware of a change in the room. The whispered conversations had tailed off, all movement had stilled and everyone turned to face the man who had just entered through the room's only other door.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the sale by auction of the estate of Marvin Calderwood. Please prepare to place your bids on any items that may have piqued your interest."

Hannah half-listened to the rest of the auctioneer's spiel while keeping a close eye on "her" box, scanning the room to see if anyone else was paying it too much attention. It appeared, however, she was the only one drawn to that particular lot and relaxed, content to observe the bidding and wait her turn.

"And now we come to lot number 37, a box, presumably containing miscellaneous items and simply labeled "Stuff". I'll start the bidding at fifteen, will somebody give me fifteen pounds?"

Hannah looked around nervously, about to raise her hand to bid, when she noticed nobody else seemed remotely interested. She looked back at the auctioneer, who looked around the room a few more seconds before finally asking, "Ok, who'll start me off at ten pounds? Ten pounds, anyone? No? Five, will anyone offer me five?"

Hannah couldn't bear it any longer and nearly jumped up in the air in her eagerness to secure the box. "Yes!", louder than she'd intended, "I'll have it. I mean, yes, five pounds, I'll bid five pounds."

"Five pounds I'm bid, any further bids? No, alright, at five pounds, lot 37 goes to the lady at the back."



2

Take the money
or open the box?

“Miss?...Miss? Excuse me, Miss Hannah Meredith?”

She was so wrapped up in the auction it took a moment before Hannah realised the voice was addressing her. Turning to meet the politely inquiring, but somehow unnerving gaze, of a small, bird-like man with lank, greasy hair and strangely small, closely packed teeth, holding out a clipboard and a pen. The man's badge read Crowne Estate Auctions, and informed anyone unfortunate enough to need to know, he was called “Bronk”, although Hannah found it difficult to believe this could be his first name.

“Yes, sorry, I was miles away.”

“If you would just like to sign here,” marking the relevant box with a neat cross, “and fill in your payment details. You can pick up your purchase on your way out.”

Hannah mumbled a thank you, scrawled on the form and accepted a receipt from the strange little man before he scuttled away and she turned back to watch the auction.

Except, there was something different about the atmosphere in the room now, it felt tense all of a sudden.

And there seemed to be a pause in the bidding.

Then she noticed some of the other guests were looking at her.

All of them, in fact.

No, that wasn't right, shaking her head. Not looking at her, watching her was more like it. As if they were waiting for her to do something. What had the clerk said; “...pick up your purchase on your way out?”

Was that a not-so-subtle hint for her to leave? Were they waiting until she left before they would continue?

Hannah stared defiantly back at the group of vaguely threatening faces for a few seconds, just to show she wasn't to be intimidated so easily, (*which she was*) then turned

and, as nonchalantly as she could, strolled over to the table nearest the door and presented her receipt to the silent, yet in some way disapproving, woman sitting behind it.

She looked briefly at the slip of paper, then glanced back up at Hannah, this time with a look of... what, surprise? curiosity? Hannah didn't know, but she did know she wanted nothing more than to grab her box of Stuff and get the hell out of there.

"Lot 37," she said, "it's that old cardboard box on the middle table, here you are."

She handed a crumpled five pound note to the woman, who took it with an expression that said she wished she had some tongs, or at least a pair of gloves, before signaling the oddly-named Bronk, who collected her box under the watchful, silent gaze of the assembled guests and carefully placed it on the table in front of her.

Hannah nodded coldly at the room in general, picked up the box and headed as quickly as dignity would allow down the stairs, into the reassuring warm coziness of the pub below. When glanced back, she caught sight of Bronk, sneering down at her as he closed the door to the upstairs room.

He paused when he saw her watching and said in a whisper, "Enjoy your purchase Miss Meredith, you've got a bargain there and no mistake."

"But, how do you...?" began Hannah, but the door closed on her question, and she heard the sound of a key turning in the lock, clearly indicating further discussion would not be forthcoming.

She bought another drink, her latest acquisition perched on the neighboring stool at the empty bar, and reflected on the bizarre experience she'd just had. The thing was, she really had been quite scared for a minute back there, but she couldn't even begin to explain to herself why that was, let alone do so to anyone else.

Picking up the box and balancing her drink on top of it just long enough to cross the rug in front of the crackling

log fire, she opened the door to the smoking area at the side of the building and went outside.

Sitting down, she leaned back on the rough stone wall, lit one of the thin cheroots her husband had hated so much and stared at the sealed and enigmatic cardboard box on the bench next to her. She was still sitting there lost in thought a few minutes later when the door to the bar opened and a tall, well-dressed man stepped out onto the small square of ash-stained paving slabs and clicked an expensive lighter. Although Hannah was surprised when she saw it lighting the ragged end of a rather inexpertly made roll-up, and the otherwise sophisticated-looking gentleman was having considerable difficulty getting it burning to his satisfaction.

Once he achieved full ignition, he took a couple of puffs, inhaled deeply and let out a huge cloud of smoke with audible relief. Then spoiled the effect by making disgusted spitting noises while picking flecks of tobacco from his mouth a few seconds later.

Hannah couldn't help it, she burst out laughing.

He looked down at her, fingers mid-grab seeking another errant strand inside his bottom lip, which made him look even more comical and Hannah laughed harder than ever.

He stubbed out his rapidly deteriorating cigarette in an ashtray and grinned back at her, held up one finger in the universal sign language of "Wait just a second" and turned his head to spit out one final unwanted piece of bitter vegetation.

She waited for him to recover his composure and then offered up one her cheroots, "Would you like one of mine?"

"No, I'd better not, thank you anyway. I quit last year, but I've gotten a bit of bad news and the barman was kind enough to give me that," he grimaced in the direction of the ashtray, "and I didn't like to ask him to make it for me."

"I had a slightly, umm, stressful experience just now too," said Hannah, "and, even though I can't claim I've ever quit, I certainly needed this one."

She took one last puff, dropped the stub next to his in the ashtray and was about to say something else when she

noticed him staring at the box.

“You bought it!” he gasped, looking from her to the box and back again in amazement, “I thought... I mean, they told me...” He stopped, seemed to gather himself somehow, then calmly looked Hannah straight in the eye and asked her in an urgent voice, “Have you opened it yet?”

“What? The box? No, I... I only just got it. At the auction upstairs. They aren’t very friendly up there though, I warn you. Although,” looking at his tailored jacket and immaculately knotted tie, “you might be more their cup of tea I suppose.”

He smiled in a distracted way, before turning more serious, “I’d like to buy it from you. Right now. What did you pay for it? I’ll give you double.”

“Erm, really? I’m not sure I want to sell it, I don’t even know what’s in here yet.”

He blinked, “I’m so sorry, how rude of me, I haven’t introduced myself,” holding out his hand, “Paul Forrester, pleased to meet you.”

She shook his hand, “Hannah, Hannah Meredith.” she said, “That’s ok, you’re obviously having a bad day and I’m dreadful with names anyway,” she laughed again, “memory like a sieve.”

“So,” all business again, “how would you like to make a quick profit on your box of old junk?” Flashing her a quick encouraging grin, but was still clearly expecting an affirmative answer.

This is getting strange again, thought Hannah, I think it may be time to make my excuses and leave. Out loud, she said, “I’ll tell you what, do you have a card? Wait until after I’ve gotten home and had a look at what’s inside, then I’ll know whether I want to sell it or not. If I do, you’ll be the first to know. How’s that?”

“I’ll give you a thousand pounds, here and now. Cash.” Reaching into his jacket and bringing out a bulging wallet, from which he extracted a thick wad of fifty pound notes. He then made a show of counting out twenty of the crisp notes onto the table and placing his hand on top of the pile.

“Box unopened, no questions asked, one time offer. What do you say?”

“I’m sorry, I’m going to stick to what I said,” eyeing the stack of cash regretfully. The voice in her head, however, had other ideas, crying out, are you mad!? That’s £1,000 there, you fool, think of all the other boxes of stuff you could buy with that!

But what came out of her mouth was a little more tame. “I promise I’ll call you if you give me your number. I give you my word as a fellow junk hunter.”

This completely failed to raise a smile, in fact Forrester was becoming more agitated by the second and seemed about to launch into another appeal, so Hannah stood up, tucked the box under her arm and stepped back into the warm, woodsmoke-scented pub, placing her empty glass on the nearest table as she made for the front door. More than ready to leave this night, and Forrester, behind her.

He caught up with her in the car park.

“Miss Meredith? I apologize, I didn’t mean to upset you,” stopping a few paces from her, hands held out in a conciliatory gesture, “here, take my card as you suggested, I’ll wait to hear from you.”

Handing her a classy, heavily embossed business card with just his name and a phone number. “My private number,” he said, “call me anytime, day or night, ok?”

She nodded. He held her gaze for a few seconds and seemed to decide something, nodded in return and headed back inside the pub, leaving her alone in the silent car park.

It was only as she drove home did it occur to Hannah that people had been calling her “Miss” all evening, even though she’d never met any of them before, and she did not yet have the courage to remove her wedding ring, despite having reverted to her maiden name since her husband’s death.

How did they know? It was just another odd detail to a very strange evening indeed, and all the strangeness made her even more keen to get her purchase home and find out what the mysterious box contained.