

UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE

William had unearthed the artefact during the excavation of the site that morning. Ever since, words had started to silently fill his mind, infuse him with sweet whispers.

'Our life ... finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks.'

During the break for lunch, they continued to echo through him. Descriptive, wondrous words. He looked down the hill to where the Watchers were guarding the site – the remains of a 21st Century library – their laser guns glinting in the sun. Waves of heat rippled up from the scorched valley, the hot breeze rattling the limpid leaves of the oak beneath which William now sat.

At the edge of the oak's shadow, Anne rested, cocooned in a bed of grass. She looked across at William, her programmed partner of the past two years. 'You've been daydreaming again, haven't you? Unorthodox thought processes are strictly forbidden, as you well know.' She gave William a warning look and nodded down in the direction of the Watchers, one of whom had stopped and was now staring up the hill at them.

William gazed across at her sun-kissed body.

Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind

And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.

There. It was happening again. His mind filling with words. Unconventional but beautiful words, frightening in their intensity.

Anne leaned forward, arms resting on her knees and gazed down the hill. 'Will,' she said, 'there's something on your mind. I know there is.' She turned to look at him, her dark eyes anxious. 'And it's frightening me.'

William pulled the artefact from his pocket and eased himself down next to her. 'I found it this morning,' he said.

Anne stared down at the black, corroded metal cylinder in his hand.

'What is it?' she asked.

The words within him explained.

'It's a fountain pen. Used to make words. They decorated a substance called "paper". You scratched it with the pen. Like this.' William drew a thin line in the soil.

Anne reached across and took the pen from him. 'And where did paper come from?'

William gently placed his hand under her chin and tilted her head up.

'See the branches of this oak tree?' he said. 'In the second millennium Man crushed such branches to make paper.' He felt her shudder slightly. 'Back then Man had the freedom to read and write words on such paper.' William leaned across and gripped Anne's arm tightly. 'And they were such wonderful words.'

As he spoke, a breeze sang joyfully in the branches above them and a leaf spiralled down. William reached out and caught it in his palm as more words flowed.

We have lived long enough; our way of life

Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf.

He knew what they meant. Now, so did Anne. They kissed. A final farewell kiss.

While in the valley, a Watcher downloaded their programmes.

Briefly, his finger hovered over the keyboard and then deftly descended on 'delete'.