

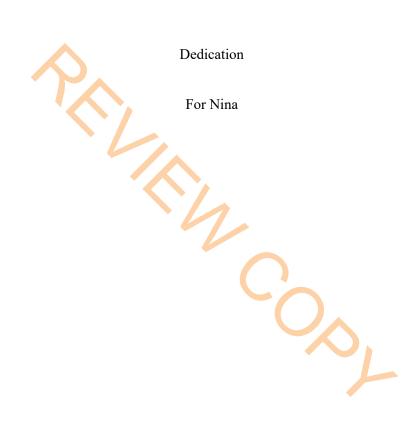
About the Author

M.P. Ashman was born in Maryborough, Queensland in 1985 but the family soon moved to Toowoomba, where Ashman has spent the majority of his life. Discovering a love of writing at eight years old, it was perhaps due to books such as *The Neverending Story* that his initial interest was in fantasy fiction. Many years later however, he began to carve out his niche in Science Fiction with the initially self-published offering *Time's Child* in 2014. However, this and other self-published titles were withdrawn from the market in 2016, with a view to seeking traditional publication.

The main characters of the Time Twins series were initially conceived in 2003 whilst Ashman was still at school, but it would not be until many years later that they would find their voice and their story.

Ashman continues to live in Toowoomba with his family including his cat, Prue.

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M P Ashman

TIME TWINS #1 THE WATER TOWER



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Chapter 1

"Stacey hurry up. You don't want to be late on your first day at school."

Glancing at the hairbrush in her hand, Stacey Stevens winced painfully. Although her mother had assumed that she was still asleep in bed, she had in fact been busy trying to get the bedtime tangles out of her hair. She may not have wanted to be late on her first day, but she had no desire to look as though she'd just woken up either. Pulling the small amount of blonde hair from the bristles, Stacey's face twisted in disgust. Was this all that had come from the past fifteen minutes?

"Stacey Stevens, get a move..." Her mother's voice trailed off, as she noticed her in the bathroom.

Choosing not to acknowledge her mother, she instead turned her liquid blue eyes on her reflection, whose own liquid blue eyes stared right back at her. Mournfully, she tossed her brush back into the vanity drawer, depositing the small amount of hair in the waste basket beside it, before heading out.

Downstairs, she could see that breakfast was already on the table: freshly squeezed orange juice, golden buttered toast, a rasher of bacon and two sunny fried eggs, accompanied by a bright red cooked tomato. Stacey took her seat, tucking eagerly into the inviting platter.

She and her mother had moved into the small town of Einstein's Plateau less than a month ago, following the finalisation of her parents' divorce. Her father, a big city lawyer for the Brisbane City Council, had abandoned them for his secretary, a slim brunette nearly half his age nearly two years ago, although her mother had held out hope that he would come to his senses and return to them for what Stacey regarded as much longer than necessary before filing for divorce. Prior to that, he had been disbarred for embezzlement of council funds. As far as his daughter was concerned, he was a thieving sleaze bag who didn't deserve them – she'd had no contact with him since these events.

For the first few weeks following the move, it had just been Stacey and her mother. It was end of term when they'd finally left Brisbane, and school was closed down for the holidays. Just as well, because Stacey hadn't managed to meet anyone her own age in all that time, and the thought of starting at a new school terrified her, especially with everything that was going on at the moment. Even now, she was still desperately searching for a way to avoid it.

"Mum, can't I stay home one more day? We've still got so much unpacking to do."

"No, you can't," Mum replied. "I don't want your education to start suffering because of your father. I'm already blaming him for everything else."

Stacey coughed, holding her head, just in case her mother had missed that part of her performance. "I think I'm coming down with something," she tried.

Feigning concern, her mother laid a hand against her forehead, before tapping her lightly on the back of the head. "You'll survive. Now get going."

Defeated, Stacey groaned and ran back upstairs.

Face to face with her reflection for the second time that morning, Stacey brushed her teeth whilst simultaneously straightening her uniform, as well as fighting the urge to run a comb through her hair once more. Little wisps of white blonde hair teased her with their presence, fluttering gently in the breeze that whispered through the bathroom window.

Spitting out her toothpaste, Stacey sighed to herself as she took a mouthful of water to rinse out the rest, before turning to head out. As she came to the top of the stairs, something made her pause briefly.

The room on the right was a small space, with the same white carpet as in Stacey's own room; like its counterpart, it had a single doorway leading out into the hall and a small single window with an eastern exposure, which should have made it light and airy. At the moment though, the room was quite dark, despite not having curtains.

The reason for this was simple. When Stacey and her mother had first moved in, they had brought boxes of things with them which, although they would probably never use them, they did not have the heart to get rid of, and because there was no space anywhere else, this room had become the designated 'Box room.' As such, it was piled high and stuffed full of nondescript cardboard boxes so that, although she knew that the carpet was similar to her own, it could scarcely be seen underneath the piles and piles of boxes.

Despite having passed this room hundreds of times, Stacey could not help feeling on this particular occasion that something was off, as though the room's current state was somehow not the way it should be.

"Stacey, are you ready yet?"

"Coming, Mum!" Stacey shrugged off the queer feeling, shouldered her bag and hurried down the stairs.

Stacey's first impression upon seeing Rosen High School was that it looked somewhat like a prison, although she supposed that most students felt that way about their school. Initially, all she could see was the high wire fence although as they got closer, she could see a number of single storey brick buildings. As her mother's red Subaru Impreza rounded into the car park, she saw that a concrete walkway connected them to one another.

At this hour, Stacey and her mother were not the only ones coming into the school, and all around them she could see other cars jockeying for position as well as students with – and without – bicycles trying to cross the car park safely in order to reach the classrooms.

"There's a spot," she called helpfully.

Stacey's mother turned the car in the direction her daughter had indicated, narrowly missing a dismounted student walking his bike beside him as he headed to the bike rack. Fortunately, both they and he made it out without incident. Stacey's mother cut the engine and unclipped her seat belt.

"You're not coming, are you Mum?" she asked, mortified.

"Well... yes. We have to sign you in at the Principal's Office so they know you're here."

"I'm pretty sure I can take care of that myself," Stacey offered, hoping her mother would take the hint. Unfortunately, she didn't.

"I'm sure you can, sweetheart. But the school requires that a parent or legal guardian accompany you during the enrolment process."

Stacey gave up, rolling her eyes as she exited the car. She knew she wasn't going to win this one, might as well get the public humiliation over with now.

The school office was a central building, with the other classrooms surrounding it like protective family members. The concrete walkway seemed to connect to it via a concrete porch which encircled its perimeter. Stacey kept her head down as she and her mother walked through the glass double doors, embarrassed that her

future peers should see her heading to the Principal's Office on the first day.

Inside, the school office was just like any other: off to the side was a large reception desk, whilst opposite that were two small offices, both with doors closed and labels that said 'Principal' and 'Vice Principal.' As they approached, a young male student exited the door on the left, the Principal's Office.

Approaching the empty secretarial desk, Mum pressed the little bell that sat there, over which was a sign which said 'Ring for attendance.' Immediately, there was a low jangling sound, which further embarrassed Stacey.

A short woman with grey hair emerged from one of the offices down the hall which, up until now, had remained unnoticed. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Melissa Stevens, and this is my daughter, Stacey. I called about her enrolment last Thursday."

The woman picked up a folder, examining its contents. "Ah yes, Stacey. And you're... ninth grade, my dear?"

Stacey nodded meekly. She didn't really like being called 'my dear' by a perfect stranger, but felt that it was not her place to say anything.

The woman continued to examine the folder's contents before looking up at them again. "Well, everything seems to be in order. I'll just buzz the Principal to make sure he's available."

"Yes, Janice?" came a voice over the intercom.

"The Stevens girl and her mother are here for her enrolment interview."

"Send them in," replied the deep masculine voice, sighing heavily as he finished his sentence.

"The Principal will see you now," announced Janice unnecessarily.

The Principal's office was a small, dark room with a filing cabinet in one corner. At the back of the room was a large desk in front of which were two uncomfortable-looking chairs. Behind the desk was a leather chair, with the man himself upon it.

The Principal himself was a proportionately large man, with greying hair and stubby fingers. On his equally large nose was a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, through which he looked as they approached. He rose to extend his hand towards Stacey's mother, his considerable bulk wobbling as he did so. "I'm Principal Hartmann. You must be Melissa," he said pleasantly. "And you must be Stacey, our new student."

Stacey nodded.

"She's a little nervous around strangers," Mum explained. "Come on, Stacey. He won't bite."

"Or maybe I will. Who knows?"

Stacey smiled, despite herself.

"Please, sit down," Principal Hartmann offered, only resuming his seat once they had done likewise. "Stacey –

may I call you Stacey? I understand you're a little nervous about starting a new school. I was no better at your age. In fact – and this is our little secret – when I was first transferred here, I was a mess, and that was only three years ago."

"You were?"

"Indeed, I was. Believe me, those feelings aren't limited to being fourteen. Anyway, I can assure you that I personally will do everything in my power to ensure that your school career with us is a pleasant one."

Stacey found herself warming to him more as the interview went on: he explained the school curriculum, their anti-bully campaign and hosts of other things which, despite her personal distaste, made Rosen High School seem more appealing every minute. "One other thing you will have noticed," he went on. "Is that the senior and junior branches are separated. This decision was made to ensure that the senior students do not pressure the younger students. That is not to say that you cannot involve yourself with the seniors, if that is your wish, but so that if there is any undue pressure put upon younger students by their elders, you will always have a place to come. As such, both branches are administrated separately: the vice principal works out of the office on the senior grounds." To prove his point, he led them out of his office and over to the door marked 'Vice Principal,' which he opened to reveal a broom cupboard.

Stacey looked at him curiously.

"My door is always open," he said, in anticipation of her question.

"But what if you're not available?"

"On those occasions my counterpart takes over here, and one of the senior staff teachers administrates the senior school. But those instances are very rare, so you will mostly find that I, myself, will be the Principal in residence."

An unexpected wave of relief washed over her. It was hard enough beginning at a new school without having to rely on someone she had never met if there was a problem on her first day.

From somewhere outside a bell chimed.

"Our work here is finished," Principal Hartmann announced. "You might want to get to your next class. I believe the ninth grade are in... social studies, Janice, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yes, indeed, Mr Hartmann," the secretary confirmed.

"That would be... Classroom A, correct?"

Janice again confirmed his supposition.

Stacey turned to go, before pausing at the door. "What about books?"

"I'll have the librarian put them together. You can pick them up during lunch. In the meantime, just inform your teachers you have my permission to observe this morning's lessons." Ensuring she had correctly memorised Janice's directions, Stacey hurried out the door.

Classroom A was a low brick building on the south side of the school. Its front face had a large glass window, which was presently opened to reveal the fly screen behind it, next to which was a large wooden door which was also presently open. As Stacey came closer, she could hear the murmur of the teacher's voice as she instructed the class, followed by several different voices as eager students asked questions. Closer still, she could see beyond the door, noticing several other students with hands raised, straining to be noticed beyond their classmates.

At the front of the room was a large whiteboard and the teacher's desk, while two-thirds of the remaining space was filled by several smaller desks and chairs in rows of around four, very few of which seemed unoccupied. As she entered the room, several students looked up with interested curiosity, although it seemed several minutes before the teacher stopped her lecture.

"Ah, you must be our new student. Would you please come to the front of the room?"

Stacey glowed with embarrassment. Actually, the front of the room was the last place she wanted to be on her first day but, as a new student, she had very little choice.

"Class, this is Stacey Stevens. She's just come to us from Brisbane, so I hope you'll make her feel welcome." Stacey twisted her fingers. The ends of her nails already looked well chewed despite her recent manicure, and she knew that exhibiting such behaviour on her first day would not go down well with her new classmates.

"Stacey, would you like to tell us a bit about yourself?"

Stacey gulped, shoving her hands into the pockets of her uniform, although they still wriggled as if they possessed a life of their own. "I... I just moved here with my Mum," she stammered, aware that her voice was shaky. "I... um..."

"It's alright, Miss Stevens. You can sit down."

Stacey nodded, taking the first empty chair she could find.

"Perhaps it would be better if you introduce yourselves to Miss Stevens individually," the teacher told the class. "In the meantime, I suggest you all take out your books..."

"First day nerves, eh?"

It took Stacey awhile to figure out who was speaking, until she saw that the girl next to her had raised her textbook to cover both their faces. She nodded, uncertainly.

"Don't worry too much, you'll get over it," the other girl replied. "Things here are pretty relaxed."

Again Stacey nodded, trying to subtly hint to the other girl to keep quiet. As this was her first day, she had

no desire to get herself into trouble this quickly – it wouldn't do to wind up back at the Principal's office so soon, and certainly not for the wrong reasons.

"My name is Abigail, by the way. Abigail Hunter." She extended her hand under their desks, looking disappointed when Stacey did not immediately return the gesture.

Feeling sorry for her, Stacey re-thought her attitude, shaking the girl's hand abruptly before turning back to the front of the room. She almost missed the sudden hurt in Abigail's green eyes – almost, but not quite.

Stacey spent the rest of that morning feeling like the Ice Queen, as though somehow everything was her fault. Throughout the next couple of lessons, all she could think about was how she had hurt her classmates' feelings, possibly ruining her only chance of making what would have amounted to her first genuine friend since coming here. By the time the lunch bell rang, Stacey was almost positive that she had totally botched her first day.

The library building was somewhat larger than its counterparts. Although the outside was of similar design, with large glass windows and a wooden door, the inside was remarkably different: the majority of it was covered in enormous varnished bookshelves, each of which was labeled at various points to indicate the type of books it contained; at the back of the room were study cubicles and computer terminals, whilst the centrepiece was a librarians desk on which was a computer, several stacks

of books and a little brass bell. A sign tacked to the front of the desk said: 'Silence Please.'

Stacey stood there for several minutes before plucking up the courage to ring the bell.

The moment she did so, a short, squat woman with tight brown curls emerged from behind one of the shelves. "How can I help you, Miss?"

"I'm Stacey Stevens. Principal Hartmann said I could pick up my books here."

"Ah, yes, the ninth grade's new student, just one moment." As the librarian rummaged under the desk, neither one of them heard the soft movement of the wooden door.

Stacey was startled to see Abigail standing beside her; evidently, so was Abigail because the moment she saw Stacey, her green eyes blinked through her glasses. "Don't worry. I'll be out of your hair in a moment."

All the guilt she'd felt that morning came rushing back into her heart. Shifting the weight of her books so that she could extend her hand, Stacey smiled warmly. "I'm sorry, Abby. Can you forgive me?"

Delighted, 'Abby' shook the offered hand. "Want to go have lunch together?"

Stacey thought about her new friend's proposal, looking down at the rather heavy pile of books she was holding. "Can you help me put these away first?"

The ninth grade lockers were located on the western side of Classroom C which, apart from being the girls' homeroom, also doubled as their English classroom. Locker 371, Stacey's locker, was on the left hand side in the row above Abigail's; unfortunately, the lower corner of the locker seemed to have been impacted, so it took them a while to open. The inside of the locker seemed rather dusty, and a couple of cobwebs seemed to have been spun in the corners – there was even a small spider, which immediately rushed to avoid them as soon as it saw the light.

Stacey brushed away the cobwebs, screwing up her face as her hands came into contact with the sticky silk.

"Don't like spiders, huh?" Abigail asked from beside her.

"Not really." She dumped the textbooks inside, after allowing her eyes to examine the titles of a couple of the larger volumes for a few seconds, before closing it firmly.

"Me neither," her new friend admitted.

"Where's the best spot to eat lunch?" Stacey asked, changing the subject as she rummaged in her school bag.

Abigail turned, pointing to a solid steel bench under a large birch tree on the other side of the oval. "Over there."

"Lead the way."

By the time they reached their destination, several students were already on the oval kicking around a

soccer ball that, on several occasions, came dangerously close to hitting them. Despite this, the two girls patiently took out their lunches and began to eat. All the while, the ball zoomed around the oval, bouncing off another nearby tree which was not quite as tall as the one under which they sat.

Thump!

Stacey ducked just in time as the ball came careering over her head, struck against their tree and bounced back onto the field.

"Sorry," called a male voice.

"That's okay," Stacey responded, not entirely sure that she meant it.

"Sometimes I think it's safer to play than to sit on the sidelines," Abigail confided.

"Then why aren't we?"

The two girls stripped off their school jumpers, dumping them on the bench and, after receiving permission from one of the other players, joined them on the field. Within the first couple of minutes, Stacey had already scored two goals; Abby was struggling to even catch the ball. Despite this, they were all having so much fun that they didn't realise how quickly the time had passed until the school bell chimed, concluding their lunch break and summoning them back to class.

Afternoon classes had to be the most singularly boring thing in the entire school schedule, Stacey decided. For one thing, there was only eighty minutes until home time, meaning that they just felt like a filler until it was home time; secondly, Maths and English were her two worst subjects, which made the afternoon drag on. While her teachers, both males, were friendly and understanding, it was still hard to connect with the subject matter at the best of times, let alone when all you could think of was going home. And then she saw him.

He was really rather cute, with dark hair and a dimpled smile. She estimated that he was probably just under a foot taller than her when standing. His dark hair was longer than it should have been for school, although his dark eyes, from the few times he looked behind him, were positively dreamy. Even now she could feel her heart fluttering beneath her breast.

"Stacey... hey, Stacey. Is anybody home?"

Stacey blinked, noticing Abigail's frantic whispers for the first time. "Huh?"

"If Mr Harris catches you, you'll wind up in detention," she whispered back. "Not a good look on your first day."

"Oh... uh, right." However, despite her friend's warnings – and her own determination – Stacey found it difficult to keep her focus off Dreamy Guy and on the work ahead. By the time the afternoon bell rang, even that had not managed to startle her out of her daze. It was only after Abby clapped her on the back of the head that her mind returned to normal.

The school Bus park was a sectioned off area at the top of the main car park, allowing the school buses to collect and drop off students with a minimum of interruption to other vehicles, especially in the madhouse that was after school pickup. Stacey carefully examined the timetable she had been given at the office, lining up for Bus 19 which was the only one that headed anywhere near her house. She dearly wished that her mother could have picked her up as well as dropping her off, if only to avoid confusion, but her mother would be at work until half five which did not fit in with the school schedule.

"Hey, Stacey."

Stacey turned to see Abigail standing beside her. "Are you on this bus, too?"

"No," she replied apologetically. "My house is in the other direction. Just came over to make sure you're okay?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I be?"

"You were kind of out of it during English. Was it something to do with that boy?"

"Why, do you know him?"

Abigail shook her head, but before she could elaborate further, a bus horn honked and she was forced to depart. Just as well, because it was at that moment that the final passengers boarded Bus 19. It was also at that moment that Stacey caught another glimpse of him.

From that point on, she was in such a daze that she almost missed her stop. By the time she realised she was two stops ahead, the only way that she could get back was to ride it out to the centre of town, and catch the bus back from there.

Climbing off the bus at the public library, she made sure to double check that she had everything in order before she did so. Thanking the driver, she dismounted and hurried up the street towards the small blue city bus. Unfortunately, she was so desperate to reach the bus in time that she did not look where she was going, crashing into another pedestrian, knocking them both on their butts.

"I'm so sorry, I..." In the middle of dusting herself down after standing once more, Stacey froze; the other girl, too, seemed frozen to the spot in awe and bewilderment

The two of them were the same height, down to the millimetre. The eyes that stared back at her were the same liquid blue – even her hair colour and skin tone were a perfect match to Stacey herself.

Both girls screamed. And that was the last she saw of her twin.