

PART THREE OF  
THE WOLFBLOOD PROPHECIES

HEART SEIZE



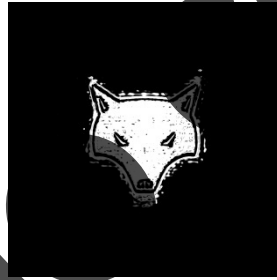
AVRIL SILK



**HEART SEIZE**

**by**

**AVRIL SILK**



**BOOK THREE**

**of**

**THE WOLFBLOOD PROPHECIES**

First published in 2012 by Avril Silk

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James Silk – Chief Objector

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**PROMO COPY**

**This book is dedicated  
to the memory of my mother  
RUTH WESTLAKE**



## Acknowledgments

So many people have encouraged and supported me in writing *Heart Seize*. My heartfelt thanks to them all. They include:

*Octavia Austin*  
*Caro Ayre*  
*Patricia Branch*  
*Diana Church*  
*Jane Embleton*  
*Polly Fox Strangways*  
*Ted Franklin*  
*Delia Harling*  
*Pauline Homeshaw of the 10 Parishes Festival*  
*Peter and Marylise Kellie*  
*Davina Knell and family*  
*Peter Lane*  
*Martin Levinson*  
*Douglas Marshall*  
*Madeleine Morey*  
*Jill Preston and the rest of QB7*  
*Andrea Saines*  
*James Silk*  
*Peter and Lurleen Soutar*  
*Patricia Stewart*  
*Glenys Townshend*  
*Alexa Vickery*  
*Marianne Watson*  
*Beth Webb*

## Acknowledgments

I have been inspired by many creative, talented people, including:

*Ray Bradbury*  
*Charles Causley*  
*Leonard Cohen*  
*Bob Dylan*  
*The Felice Brothers*  
*Kathryn Flett*  
*Neil Gaiman*  
*Laurie Graham*  
*Ursula Le Guin*  
*Miroslav Holub*  
*Terry Pratchett*  
*Philip Pullman*  
*Dorothy Rowe*  
*Joss Whedon*

Most of all, in writing the first three books of *The Wolfblood Prophecies* my son James has supported, challenged and inspired me. His creative insight and generosity of spirit have been a source of strength and delight.

Special thanks to Geraldine Beskin, of the Atlantis Bookshop, 49a, Museum Street, London. Many of the locations used in *The Wolfblood Prophecies* are real, but I have taken liberties with the routes between them, as is only to be expected from someone who had a score of 4% in her Geography mock 'O' level.

Thanks as well to the hundreds of people around the world who work so hard to make Wikipedia such an exciting and accessible work of reference.

Your heart is good.  
The Spirit Shining Darkness will be here.  
You think only of sad, unpleasant things.  
You are to think of goodness.  
Lie down and sleep here.

From a Yuma Indian Curing Song

#### THE WOLFBLOOD PROPHECY

The son of the wolf will live for ever...  
renewed through the blood of sacrifice...  
under the sign of the hooked cross...  
rolling thunder and clouds of glory...  
steeped in sin and will seek repentance...  
a mistress of memory will tame him...  
she will bear him the Child of Glory...  
the Child will be branded with secret signs ...  
the Child of Glory will lead the Rainbow Warriors  
in a time of war and destruction...

A Rainbow Warrior does not fight others,  
but battles within to find their own truth.

## Chapter One – Going Home

The helicopter climbed higher and higher as the dawn was breaking; pink and gold streaks trailed across a silver sky.

As her parents comforted each other Jo looked at the boy she had travelled so far to rescue. Smokey was barely conscious, he lay with his head in her lap, his face deathly pale, his breathing ragged and harsh. Sometimes his eyelids fluttered open and the haunted look in his eyes was testament to his ordeal; his imprisonment by a ruthless enemy.

Far below them that enemy, Jo's aunt Lethe, was being forced to watch the burial of Nick, a boy brutally murdered by her followers. Her once beautiful face was ravaged, lacerated by shattered glass. She had begged Jo to help her, to use her power to heal. Jo tried to blot out the memory.

Instead she looked down on the destruction of the *Lost Funfair of Forgotten Dreams*. The rising sun revealed it for what it truly was; a tangle of tawdry, catchpenny, shabby facades.

Her friend Hawk, a young Lakota brave, watched as Jo stroked Smokey's hair away from his eyes. 'Before you fly back to England, my foster-mother will help Smokey and Beth,' he said gently.

At the sound of her name Beth moaned softly in her sleep. 'Smokey?' she whispered, and her hand sought his. Smokey sighed, and his breathing became calmer. Jo could hardly bear it.

'She was very brave,' said Hawk.

Jo wanted to agree, but somehow the words stuck in her throat. The rest of the journey to the reservation passed in silence.



That night Jo watched as orange and gold sparks flew up into the ink-black sky. An insistent drumbeat became the beating of her heart. Shadowy figures crouched round an Indian campfire. In the pearly light of a full moon her mother and father were standing in



front of a tipi, smiling and beckoning her forward. She joined them and together they approached Grey Wolf and Summer Moon, with Hawk standing proud and tall between them, raising a red-painted buffalo skull high above his head. *I have dreamed of this, or something like this, so many times, thought Jo. But now it is real.*

Like the other women, Jo and her mother's faces were painted red. The men's were painted red with a blue circle around the face and blue lines on the forehead, cheekbones and chin.

'*Hunkapi* is The Making of Relatives,' declared Grey Wolf with great solemnity. 'Tomorrow you must leave, but you will return one day, and you will be part of our *Tiyóspaye*. Being painted symbolizes change. You have been reborn and taken on new responsibilities and new relationships. Past troubles are forgotten. *Mitakuye oyas'in*. We are all related. *Tanyán yahi yélo*. I am glad you came. *Tanyánj omániyo*. Travel safely.'

The flight from America to England was uneventful compared to recent days. All of the members of Glory Choir were chattering excitedly about the climactic events of their gala performance. However, Jo slept most of the way and in the intervals when she was awake, she did not feel like talking.

On arrival, a waiting emergency medical team had whisked Smokey and Beth straight through the Customs checks and away to the Glory Foundation's state of the art hospital - Glory Heights. The gentle wisdom of Summer Moon, Hawk's foster-mother, had helped stabilise them, but Smokey, in particular, needed more intensive care.

Jo watched the ambulance speed away with mixed emotions. The danger and worry had taken its toll on her and she was exhausted. She longed to be back home, safe in her own room, away from everyone, and that included her concerned parents. She wanted to stop trying to be brave and practical and just weep, in private, at the tragedy, the unfairness, the loss.

Her mother understood better than Jo realised. Ali wanted to reach out and comfort her daughter but she sensed Jo's need to contain the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. She recognised that the slightest gesture would demolish the defences Jo needed to maintain, and forced herself to back off.

On the other side of the arrival lounge the families of the exchange students were waiting. Emotions ran high as mothers hugged their children and fathers shouldered luggage while the jetsetters enthused excitedly about their adventure.

'The reception committee's here,' said Ali, waving furiously. She watched Jo make a supreme effort, bracing herself to reconnect with their friends.

Matthew, Mary and Reg were waiting to welcome Jo and her family. Mary took one look at their tired, strained faces, and immediately steered them towards the café. 'Clearly you all need a proper cup of English tea,' she insisted, 'then you must tell us all about it. And when you've done that, we have some news for you.' Mary was as formidable as ever and no-one argued.

Once everyone had a drink in front of them Mary said imperiously, 'Well?'

'Well, for a start,' responded Ali cheerfully, 'my evil twin managed to turn me into a teenage cheer-leader. Complete with pom-poms.'

'Please tell me you didn't ask her to do that,' sighed Mary.

Ali laughed. Mary, hawk-eyed as ever, observed that neither Jo nor Paul managed to raise a smile. 'She tricked me into asking,' said Ali.

'She really does have a talent for that,' Matthew said darkly. 'It's the only way she can get into people's memories and change them. Why, she even managed to fool Mary, all those years ago. You've never told me how she did it, my dearest.'

Mary's welcoming smile faded as she snapped, 'No. And I never will. So what were you doing, Jo, while your mother was reliving her adolescence?'

Jo hardly knew where to begin. Ali tried to come to her rescue. 'Jo was the best singer out of all the choirs,' she said proudly.

'Oh, Mum,' muttered Jo, wishing Ali wouldn't shine the spotlight on her. But there was no stopping her.

'Not only that; she and her friends, Beth and Hawk, rescued Smokey. Lethe had trapped him in the Hall of Mirrors. They were ever so brave!' She laughed as a double meaning came to her. 'Of course, Hawk is brave in two senses of the word – he was fostered by Summer Moon and Grey Wolf – oh! You don't know about Grey Wolf! He's a Lakota chief!'

'I know the name,' frowned Matthew. 'When I was a young man I travelled extensively in North America and met many Lakota Indians - perhaps I met Grey Wolf then!'

'Turns out he's Paul's father,' revealed Ali. 'And Jo's grandfather!'

At last Jo managed to relax. Among all the terrible things that had happened in America, meeting her grandfather and his wife, Summer Moon, had been wonderful.

For a while the talk flowed freely as the present-day drove away the shadows of the past. Paul smiled as he talked about his father, and Jo just sat quietly, letting the conversation flow around her.

'What's the latest news from Brenda? Paul turned to Reg, who like Jo, had contributed very little to the chatter.

His answer was brief. 'Her kid sister's got herself into some kind of trouble – again. Pain in the proverbial. Born to be hanged.' And that was it.

A silence fell. Jo wished Reg hadn't said that. Try as she might, she couldn't stop thinking about Nick. Lethe's followers had kidnapped Nick and Beth, then lynched him.

Sharp as ever, Mary noticed Jo's discomfort and moved the conversation on. 'So how did you get Smokey away from Lethe?'

'I sang,' said Jo flatly. Mary raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'The music seemed to take me over.'

'Go on,' urged Mary.

Jo remembered how her voice had soared, strong and powerful, filling the Hall of Mirrors with echoes and high, wild harmonies.

'All the glass shattered, and we escaped.'

'What happened to Lethe?' Matthew couldn't disguise his anxiety.

There was a terrible silence.

'Is she dead?' demanded Matthew. He was very agitated.

Jo shook her head.

Another long silence. At last Ali spoke. 'Her face was sliced to ribbons. She looks hideous.'

Matthew gasped in horror. The colour drained from his face and his hand flew to his heart.

Mary moved quickly. She reached into her pocket for a small brown bottle. She opened it quickly and took out a small pill. 'Under your tongue,' she commanded, and popped it into Matthew's mouth.

'Nitro-glycerine tablets,' she explained tersely. 'His heart's a bit dicey. Must have been a shock to hear about Lethe.' She watched anxiously as the pill took a few minutes to take effect. 'Right. Let's get you home,' she said. 'Come on, Reg, give me a hand.' Together they helped Matthew to his feet. He looked a little dazed, but seemed to be recovering.

'Shouldn't we call a doctor?' asked Ali anxiously.

'Don't fuss. He'll soon be right as rain.'

However, Mary had spoken too soon.

Matthew stumbled. His eyes rolled horribly and fixed upon Jo's. Panic seized her as pain gripped her chest. She screamed. Everyone shot to their feet as Matthew collapsed face-first into the table, sending teacups and cutlery clattering everywhere. As he slid to the floor, his left hand clutched at his chest while his right hand gripped the tablecloth, dragging it and the remaining crockery inexorably down to the ground. His head hit the floor with a sickening thud as the teapot smashed next to him.

'Everyone out the way!' boomed Reg. 'He's having a heart attack!'

In the blink of an eye, Reg was cradling the fallen Matthew, his huge arms wrapped tight around him, one hand supporting his head while the other pressed vigorously on his chest. 'Call an ambulance!'

Paul ran to find a telephone as Ali held the stricken Mary, while her eyes fixed desperately on Jo. With a superhuman effort, Jo pulled herself to her feet. She practically fell onto Reg as she reached forward, laying her hands over his. Ignoring her own pain, Jo closed her eyes and thought of orange and gold sparks in an ink-black sky. A full moon, pale as a pearl, flickered with ever-changing, barely focussed images; the healing lotus; Summer Moon's face; a buffalo skull. Healing energy emanated from her and through Reg into Matthew's terrified mind and tortured body. Nobody moved until the paramedics arrived.

Ali, Paul and Jo watched helplessly as the ambulance drove Matthew and Mary away. Jo and Ali felt particularly wretched knowing that the news about Lethe's ruin had caused the attack.

Reg gave Jo one of his huge grins. 'Cheer up, girlie' He's as strong as an ox. He'll be back on his feet in no time.' But there was a hollowness to his voice that couldn't be hidden.

'She never did tell us their news,' said Jo.

## Chapter Two - Convalescence

'Smokey, I know you're awake. Are you ever going to talk to me?' Jo tried to keep the impatience out of her voice. She studied the tall, thin boy slumped in the soft grey velvet armchair, willing him to speak. Was that a shrug? It was so hard to tell in the dimly lit room. Smokey was surrounded by shadows. It was hard to be sure he was even there, sometimes. He just blended into the background, the only place where he felt safe.

The silence deepened. Jo sighed. 'You can't stay here forever, Smokey. This is a hospital, not a home.'

As soon as the words were said, Jo regretted them. She had no idea where Smokey had lived before she met him. He had told her very little about his family. All she remembered was a brief conversation about his older sister, Bridget, abducted years before by Jo's aunt, Lethe Lacuna, and her consort, Titus Stigmurus.

*She was always ... different. Stigmurus and Lacuna discovered her and took her.*

With a start, Jo picked up on Smokey's thoughts. Not only did she empathise with his words, but she felt his sorrow as well. The feeling engulfed her and without warning she was there, in Smokey's memory. She tried to empathise with Smokey, but she was trapped; he was unaware of her presence. With growing horror, she relived his worst day.

*My mother was devastated. That woman asked her if she wanted some help to forget the pain, and my mother said yes. She wiped my mum's memory of Bridget clean away.*

Jo stopped struggling as her panic subsided. Pity washed over her as she shared Smokey's helplessness.

*Not only that, but Mum forgot about me as well.*

Tears ran down Jo's face.

*Oh, she smiles at me in a vague, kindly way, but she has no idea who I am.*

Darkness surrounded Jo as Smokey's heart erupted with rage. Deep red shapes throbbed against her eyes. She was plunged again into the ocean of Smokey's anger and grief.

*That bitch stole everything from me. My sister, my mother and my joy. She ruined my life.*

Shards of lightning flared throughout his soul filling Jo with bitterness, sour and corrosive.

*As I shall ruin hers.*

With a gut-wrenching lurch, Jo was slammed back into her own body. She sprang to her feet but Smokey remained motionless, it was as if nothing had happened; as if no time had passed.

As the shock gently subsided, Jo gingerly reached out with her feelings toward Smokey again. His barriers were completely down.

Lethe Lacuna had imprisoned him in his worst nightmare and his mind was still there; lost on the other side of the world in his own special hell, deep in the heart of the sinister *Lost Funfair of Forgotten Dreams*. The memory of Smokey's prison, the dazzling Mirror Maze, blinded him.

Jo watched through Smokey's mind's eye. Their link had taken on a powerful new dimension.

*Everything shone with pain. Fire raged against Smokey's eyes. Squeezing his eyes shut had long since stopped working and now he simply lay there limp, experiencing the agony. His throat was parched, his tongue a dried husk in his mouth. The heat of the halogen lights above the angled mirrors felt hotter than the sun.*

Jo emped him, trying to reach out to him in his isolation. ***It's over. You're safe now.***

There was no response. Jo continued to observe.

*Laying on white surrounded by white full of light. Lying in wait tortured by hate full of spite. Smokey could no longer tell if he was hot or cold. He was either engulfed in an unending inferno or frozen in a glacier on a dead and distant world. Only the most occasional of thoughts would echo across the void of his mind.*

'You're safe now,' said Jo.

Smokey stirred in his chair. Before she could prevent it, Jo was dragged into another of Smokey's memories.

*Deep in the tunnel of love, Smokey felt soft hands stroking his face. He turned and felt the warmth of another. As he opened his eyes pain seared his sight. He winced and burrowed blindly into the warmth and softness.*

*You're safe now, came a voice.*

*Gradually, delicately, Smokey opened his eyes a slit. Blood red heat burned his eyes. Smokey felt anger stir within him and without fear, stared back at the pain. Slowly, the heat cooled. Soothing ice filled his mind and heart.*

*You're safe now.*

*Opening his eyes as much as he dared, Smokey looked up. The silhouette of a girl leaned over him.*

*You're safe now.*

*Feeling his heart leap with hope, Smokey said;  
Beth?*

Jo's heart finally broke. With an anguished wrench she turned away from Smokey and his memories. She curled up on the floor with her knees to her chin and wept. Huge sobs tore through her, causing her to convulse as Smokey sat there in his chair, oblivious.



As she lay there, feeling as if she were pierced and dying, Jo remembered things as they were.

She had travelled halfway across the world to an American Indian reservation to find Smokey, but her aunt was determined to prevent any attempts at rescue. Jo and her friend Hawk were only one step ahead of Lethe.

*Shining white marbled pillars supported Gothic arches over aisles lined, sometimes with mirror, sometimes with window glass. Silver mirror balls turned slowly, reflected in ceilings that were also mirrored. Festoons of silvery fairy lights glittered, illuminating every surface.*

*Hawk stooped over Smokey's crumpled body and picked him up effortlessly. As he straightened up he saw Lethe. He whispered to Jo, whose blazing eyes met Lethe's, reflected over and over again.*

***This is the exit, Jo. Are you ready?***

*Jo nodded, drew a deep breath, and unleashed a torrent of sound. Reaching down deep within herself, Jo grasped her very soul and forced it to be heard, her voice climbing ever higher until she was singing notes she had never sung before.*

***Louder, Jo. As loud as you possibly can.***

*Hawk longed to cover his ears – their sensitivity meant agonising pain as Jo sang such high and wild notes – but instead he held onto Smokey – poor, broken Smokey – as Jo's voice continued to soar.*

***Hurry! She's gaining ground!***

*From every direction Hawk saw Lethe's reflections, her face contorted with fury, her arms reaching out to stop the unbearable noise. Jo sang on and hit a note so high the vibrations made the mirror balls start to shake. There was a moment when time stood still until with a great cracking sound, the Mirror Maze began to shatter. As Jo followed Hawk and Smokey through the exit, she glanced back as Lethe screamed, shrouded by cascades of shattering glass.*

Jo tried to blot out the memory of her aunt's once-beautiful face, ripped to shreds by the rain of glass shards. *I could have healed her*, she thought, *and I didn't*. Her heartbreak deepened as she lay there, remembering her aunt, bloodied and broken, pleading for help.

Jo had walked away, telling herself that Lethe had put herself beyond the reach of mercy with her terrible actions. But deep inside, Jo feared she had been cruel. And wrong. The memory tore her apart.

***She had it coming to her. Don't waste your pity.***

Jo jumped. 'Smokey?' she said cautiously. She quickly put up her shield. How long had Smokey been reading her thoughts?

***I wish I'd killed her when I had the chance.***

Jo rallied to pull herself together, swiftly wiping away her tears.

'I don't want her dead,' said Jo flatly. 'And I don't want you to have a murder on your conscience.'

***Don't concern yourself with my conscience.***

Jo eyed him cautiously. She saw no trace of warmth or kindness. With a growing numbness she looked at him openly. His fists were clenched and his jaw was set, his eyes harsh and accusing. She looked away with a sigh and felt empty. 'Can't you just talk to me normally?'

***Emping's easier. Talking still hurts.*** Smokey's eyes were closed as he remembered the casual torture of Lethe's guards, leaving him without water until he was desperate for something to drink, then pouring something wet over his face and forcing him to swallow so much that he felt he was drowning.

***That bastard Titus keeps coming to see me. Wants to forgive me! Seems to think I'd like his forgiveness for leaving him to rot in that old gunpowder factory. As if. I reckon I deserve a medal. Pity he didn't go up in flames with it. Then he asked me to forgive him because 'he sanctioned Lethe's misguided attempt at correction.' Apparently he is truly penitent. Said***

***he wants to make it all up to me. To be like a father to me. They all think Stigmurus is a saint now. That man is and will always be evil.***

Jo shuddered as she remembered how Smokey left Titus, bound, gagged and naked in the cellar of the disused gunpowder factory where Lethe had conducted her experiments for CUT, the Centre for Utilisation and Training.

'What did you say?' she gasped.

***I said I'd be absolutely delighted.***

'You forgave him?'

***Oh, don't be thick. Of course I didn't. I said I'd see him in Hell first. Now he keeps turning up with presents for me.***

A long silence followed. Jo looked around her, taking in for the first time how the simple hospital side-room had been subtly transformed since her last visit. It was luxurious and restful, filled with every diversion a teenage boy could wish for.

'Did Titus do all this?'

***He said it was the least he could do. Have a grape. He had them flown in especially from Shiraz.***

Jo was following her own train of thought. 'I just don't understand how he and Mirabel escaped from that terrible explosion. They were in the Tunnel of Love at the same time as us, when we were hiding from Lethe.'

Jo tried not to cry as she remembered how safe and warm she had felt inside the tunnel. She tried not to think about how good it was being close to Smokey. She recalled something her mother said. *I have never experienced anything so romantic. It was no ordinary fairground ride.*

Weakly, Jo attempted to change the subject.

'A letter from Hawk arrived this morning. Haven't had time to look at it yet. Would you like me to read it to you?'

***Suit yourself.***

Jo had had enough. With a contemptuous wave she threw the letter at him, pages scattering everywhere.

'Fine! Read it yourself,' she snapped.

***What the hell's wrong with you? You know it's still difficult.***

Jo immediately felt contrite. She had forgotten that Smokey's sight was still badly affected by the blinding light of the Mirror Maze. His recovery was painfully slow. She pulled herself to her feet and began to pick up the pieces and pages.

Jo dutifully glanced through the letter. 'He says *Hi to the cool dude*. That must be you. He's still at the Pastor's place, organising another music festival for next summer.' She studied the letter carefully.

*Summer Moon has found out that the bones of one of her ancestors are on display in a museum in London. She wants them repatriated so they can be treated with proper respect and is hoping you and your Dad will support her appeal.*

***I could slip in and get them. Piece of cake. Museum security is a joke.*** For a moment Smokey looked more like his old self, then the apathy descended on him again like a fog.

Jo carried on reading.

*Everything happened so fast, I never really told you what happened when we got separated in the Tunnel of Love. Well, I was trying to get away from Billy Joe Thunder's men and I noticed a door behind the curtains. I went through and down some stairs. I saw this huge room and an enormous generator...*

Jo heard the door open and looked up from her letter. 'Oh, hello, Beth,' she said. She even tried to inject a little enthusiasm into her voice. She had no intention of letting her heartache show. Even though Beth had played a huge part in Smokey's rescue, it was hard for Jo to completely trust her. 'I had a letter from Hawk. He sends his love.' *Not that you're bothered*, she thought. *You only care about Smokey*. The pangs of jealousy were painful.

Jo continued reading aloud, trying not to notice how pretty Beth was looking. She had not sought it, but Jo, already a powerful empath, had developed the ability to see through Smokey's eyes and it was, at best, a mixed blessing. At worst, it was a curse. Right now his eyes were locked on Beth's adoring face. Jo tried to blot out the sight and concentrated on Hawk's letter.

*Titus and Mirabel were there and he was going on about making clouds and controlling the weather. Something about solitons, whatever they are. Next thing I knew, Crow started shooting at me. He missed but the generator was damaged. There was a massive flood and an explosion and all hell broke loose. I scrambled back up the stairs, but Titus and Mirabel went in the opposite direction. It was as black as the Ace of Spades in there. I still have no idea how they got out and back to England.*

No-one seemed to be listening. Jo stopped reading.

'It's good to see you, Beth.' Smokey smiled. It wrenched Jo's heart to see the change in him since Beth arrived. She got up to go. Smokey carried on talking. *Suddenly talking's not so painful*, thought Jo miserably.

Smokey looked positively animated. 'I know how he and that old bitch Mirabel escaped. Titus told me all about it when he came to grovel and beg for my forgiveness. Turns out he had a plane stashed away in an underground bunker. A fifty year old bomber. Pity he didn't crash and do us all a favour. He's so keen to make the world a better place now he's gone religious. Well, the world would be a whole lot better off without either of them.'

Beth laughed. Neither she nor Smokey appeared to notice Jo pick up her visitor's security pass and leave the room.



In another part of Glory Heights an old woman watched anxiously as the doctor examined a blonde girl

sleeping peacefully in the hospital bed. She stroked the patient's hand tenderly, and wiped away a tear.

'It's nearly time,' said Doctor Mallory, looking anxiously at Head Nurse Carson.

'You'd better bleedin' look after my granddaughter,' said the old woman fiercely. 'Just in case you've forgotten our little talk, you are not to breathe a word of this to anyone. Now Mr. Titus asked you nicely, 'cos he's gone all soft and sippy since he got religion, but I ain't such a soft touch. I've got this special talent. I can wrinkle out a person's secret fears without them knowing I'm doing it.' She glared at the nurse. 'So if you wants to keep your highly-paid job so that little girl of yours can have that big, expensive operation, you knows what to do, Nurse Carson. And you, Doctor Mallory,' she added scornfully 'can count on our help in sorting out that nasty little mess you've gone and got yourself into. But if you decides not to do us this little favour, and anyone ever finds out, well, I'll let you work out the consequences for yourselves. So not a word to a living soul. And for Gawd's sake, stop shaking.'

She watched as the bed was wheeled away, then went through the French windows onto a balcony where Titus Stigmurus was sitting, almost hidden by wonderful autumnal plants, watching the copper leaves gently falling in the moonlight.

She tried to smile. 'She looked proper peaceful, Titus. Is she going to be alright?'

'Glory Heights is the best hospital in the world,' he replied proudly. 'We spared no expense when we had it built. It is the flagship of The Glory Foundation, endowed by me as my personal act of atonement for all my past wickedness, bringing God's gift of healing to a broken world. I believe that, with His blessing, Lucy will come through the operation. We know we are about to experience the miracle of a new life, Mirabel; perhaps we will be fortunate enough to witness two miracles and Lucy will be restored to us.'

'Trust a man to call birth a miracle,' sniffed Mirabel. She reached into a voluminous old carpet bag for her

knitting. 'I seems to remember a lot of pain and cussing when I 'ad Darlene, Gawd rest her soul.'

'At least Lucy will feel no pain. I can never forgive myself for what I did to her, but she will have the best care money can buy. Maybe one day she will come out of her coma and I will beg her forgiveness for shooting her.'

'It ain't likely to happen, Titus. And if she does come round, she might not have forgiveness high on her to-do list. When our Darren brought her to me she was mad as a spoon 'cos her boyfriend had given her the elbow. Gawd knows how she'd be if she were to find out she'd been and got herself shot. I thought she'd go berserk when she knew she was up the duff.'

Titus sighed. Somehow the miraculous blessing of birth seemed to escape Mirabel. 'Do we have any idea who the father is?'

'She never said, but I 'spect it was that Zebo. He were the leader of the Ferals, and Lucy ain't – weren't – ain't - the kind of girl to go for the second-in-command.'

'So where is he now?'

'Vanished. All they Ferals what was living in the Underground got moved on after all the fuss.'

'Fuss?'

'The fuss about that laboratory you set up in that old gunpowder factory so Her Ladyship could do all her nasty little experiments on they good-for-nothing kids.'

'Lethe's research is ground-breaking,' interjected Titus reproachfully. 'She is much maligned.'

Mirabel wielded her knitting needles with venom. 'If you ask me, she ain't maligned nearly enough. Anyway, when you 'ad your little holiday in the clink the government got a bit twitchy about the Ferals and set about doing good to the little bleeders. A lot of them scarpered before they got done good to.'

'Such ingratitude. *How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!*'

'Oh, I dunno. Do-gooders and people on a mission ain't my favourite geezers either. Too keen to tell everyone how to live their lives. I'd just as soon they

keep their beaks out of my affairs. 'Specially Her Ladyship.'

'But she wants to help you! Lethe is still working on the rejuvenation treatment she promised you. There was a minor setback when her American laboratory was vandalised, but she has rallied magnificently as always and is making excellent progress. You will be the first to benefit from her discoveries.'

'Well, it ain't because she wants to keep me around, and you knows it. She's just keeping in with you. All she wants from me is to know how my secret potion stops you from popping your clogs. She'll keep me going until she's worked out how I keep you alive, and then, if she has anything to do with it, I'll be for the high jump, quick as a wink.'

'Poor Lethe. So misjudged.'

'Poor Lethe, my backside. Still, so long as she's busy concocting her potions and doing her evil experiments she ain't bothering me and you, and that's a plus.'

'But wouldn't you enjoy looking young again, dear Mirabel?'

'It'd be alright, I s'pose. Got some nice frocks just hanging in the wardrobe what I'd like to get me money's worth from. But looking young's one thing, being young's another. And not dying's another. She might make me look all young and glam again – might even get a couple of years extra on the clock, but in the end it's still the last waltz with the Grim Reaper for me. But what I knows can keep you going for ever. Well, it has so far, anyway. You don't look a day over fifty, thanks to me.'

'But when you are gone, my sweet, how will we manage? Then Lethe will really need to know the formula.'

'Well, she ain't going to find it out, and even if she did, one ingredient ain't summat she can fake in that laboratory of hers.'

Titus sighed. 'Ah yes. Love.'

'Bingo. Proper love, Titus. Love for you, not for your power or your money. Oh, she loves the idea that you might be the father of the flippin' Child of Glory...'



Mirabel broke off and gave Titus a shrewd glance. 'Here, Titus – you ain't thinking that Lucy's baby might turn out to be the Child of Glory, are you?'

'Well, every child is glorious...'

'You do remember our Darlene's Darren, don't you?' interrupted Mirabel, her expression sceptical.

Titus shuddered. 'Well, every baby, perhaps. But no, I don't think Lucy or her baby fit the prophecy in any way. So we are still searching.'

Mirabel thought for a while, then came to a decision. 'I wants you to rest easy, Titus. I wants you to know I've made sure that when I'm gone, you'll get the formula. For what it's worth. But if you've got any sense you won't never let *her* know it. 'Cos if you do she'll think she can have power over you and then your life might be eternal but it wouldn't be worth living. Gawd knows why you wants to live forever anyway.'

Titus sighed. 'There is so much good I need to do. And when the prophecy comes true, and I am revealed as the father of the Child of Glory, then my role as guide and inspiration is crucial to the well-being of the world.'

'So how many children have you actually fathered, Titus?' A slight tremor in her voice made it clear that this question was not easy for Mirabel to ask. 'Let's face it, Her Ladyship's arty-farty inseminary hocus-pocus means it could run into thousands!'

'Artificial insemination, Mirabel. Lethe guards her secrets jealously. I simply do not know.' He stopped abruptly and patted her hand awkwardly. The question was hard to answer. 'I wish...'

Mirabel blinked back a tear. 'Me too, Titus. Me too.' She looked up. 'Here comes that la-di-dah doctor. Looks like summat's happened.'

### Chapter Three – Going Under

'I'm afraid there's been a complication,' said the consultant. He had hurried to the consulting room and was out of breath. He fiddled nervously with a sheaf of papers. He really hated this part of his job. 'The heart, you know, is an amazing organ. It can withstand so much, doing its wonderful work regardless of the strains we put it under. But this patient's heart is not responding. Without intervention, death is inevitable.' He waited for his words to sink in before continuing. 'However, there is something we can offer. Have you heard of the Heartsease programme?'

The old woman shook her head.

The telephone rang. The consultant took the call, listening intently. After replacing the receiver he stood up and walked towards the door.

'Forgive me – I have been called to an emergency in the private wing. My registrar will be pleased to tell you more about Heartsease. The programme is still in the developmental stage, but I believe it is the perfect solution to the problem. Good day.'

'Would you like to hold your - um - great-granddaughter? We are doing all we can for the mother... but the outlook is grave. The consultant is on his way.' Doctor Mallory looked desperately anxious to be gone. 'There was nothing we could do. As far as the other staff members know, your granddaughter experienced unexpected complications during a routine appendectomy. As we agreed, no-one else knows about the baby. A beautiful baby girl.'

Mirabel took the new-born baby to her ample bosom. The doctor vanished with indecent haste. 'Don't reckon that Zebo was the father,' observed Mirabel, carefully studying the child's pale face, blue eyes and fair hair. 'Wrong colouring.' She peered more closely. 'Funny thing is, this kid's the image of our Darren when he was born.' A thought struck Mirabel. 'Oh. Oh my.'

She looked across at Titus, but he wasn't listening to her. He was staring at the baby.

The little girl began to grizzle, softly at first, then loudly. Mirabel tried to placate the child, but just seemed to make things worse.

'Here. Let me.' Titus reached for the baby and held her tenderly. The crying stopped immediately. Mirabel looked at Titus. She had never seen him look so captivated. He was transformed. Besotted.

'Oh. Oh my.' Mirabel said again. She was thinking faster than she'd ever thought in her life.



'I'm afraid there's been a complication,' said the consultant. He had hurried to the consulting room and was out of breath. He fiddled nervously with a sheaf of papers. He really hated this part of his job. 'The heart, you know, is an amazing organ. It can withstand so much, doing its wonderful work regardless of the strains we put it under. But this patient's heart is not responding. Without intervention, death is inevitable.'

He waited for his words to sink in before continuing. 'However, there is something we can offer. You, of all people, sir, know about Heartsease. Without your generous support the work would have ended before the significant breakthrough was made.'

As the consultant discussed the Heartsease programme with Titus Stigmurus in the private wing, his registrar, in another part of the building, was imparting the same information to Mary. And an old woman, carrying a large carpet bag, hurried through the hospital grounds, flattening herself into the shadows as a deep purple limousine swept past her.



Mary Montgomery was usually so clear thinking and decisive, but the sight of her beloved Matthew in his hospital bed, pale as death, rendered her incapable of logical thought.

'When's Reg coming back with that tea?' asked Ali. She turned to Mary. 'Tell me again,' she said.

'There's no time to go over it again,' snapped Mary. Ali could imagine her at college years before, lecturing a particularly dim student. 'I can't remember all of it.'

'Yes, you can,' said Ali. She watched as her daughter took Matthew's limp hand in hers. 'Jo will do all she can to help Matthew, but we must consider all options. Try to remember what the registrar told you.' She gently rested her hand on Mary's shoulder, tapping a soft, steady rhythm, almost imperceptible.

Mary drew a deep breath, and her breathing slowed in time to Ali's tapping. As Ali held her gaze Mary became calmer.

'He said Matthew is too frail to survive a normal transplant operation, but there's this new programme called Heartsease. It's still being tested, but the results are promising. They implant something like a pacemaker, but much, much more sophisticated. They replace the defective heart with a computerised one, capable of maintaining all the functions of a healthy heart.'

'It sounds wonderful,' said Ali. 'And a great deal better than the alternative.'

Mary sighed. 'But it's still in the experimental stage. And suppose some nutter hacks into the programme? Or just decides to turn it off? Or tinkers about with it so he's not Matthew anymore? What if the components are faulty, or too expensive to replace?' She glared at Ali. 'And his heart's not defective. His heart is warm, and kind, and generous.'

'And if he was given the heart of a rhinoceros he would still be warm, and kind, and generous. You ask, *What if it goes wrong?* – I'm asking, *What if you don't try?*

'He will die.'

'Perhaps it is his time,' suggested Ali. Sometimes it was necessary to play Devil's advocate, particularly with a protagonist as stubborn as Mary. 'Is he ready to go, do you think?'

'No, he damn well is not,' snapped Mary. 'And I'm not ready to lose him. We were – we are – planning to...' she faltered, then carried on, her voice defiant.

'We are going to get married. We wanted to tell you at the airport.'

Ali laughed with delight. 'No time to waste, then. You have waited long enough.'

'More than half a lifetime. I just wish I could talk this over with him.'

Jo interrupted, her voice urgent. 'He is fading fast, Mary. There's not much time left.'

Mary squared her shoulders. 'We'll do it. Where's that registrar?'



Jo, Ali, Reg and Mary watched as Matthew was wheeled away to the operating theatre. 'Apparently the consultant I saw first is doing the same operation in the private wing right now,' said Mary anxiously, 'but they're bringing in the team who pioneered Heartsease to advise the registrar for Matthew. It feels risky, but there's no choice. If I were a religious woman, I'd start praying. Hell, I'm going to pray anyway. Is there a chapel here?'

'It's by the entrance,' said Ali. 'I noticed it as we came in. Are you coming, Reg?'

'Don't think I've got a lot of credit with the Almighty,' said Reg. 'Reckon I'll be off for now. Got loads to do at HQ. I'll be glad when Brenda gets back next week. All the paperwork's piling up something rotten.'

'Is Brenda's sister OK now?' asked Ali.

'It will take more than a visit from Brenda to straighten her out,' said Reg bluntly. 'She's a walking disaster. But yes, she's a bit better. Don't exactly know what it was this time. One minute we're in America checking out the Glory Foundation – the next minute Brenda's on a plane. Haven't seen hide nor hair of her since.'

'I bet you've missed her,' said Ali.

'Aye.' Reg looked awkward. 'Right then. I'm off. I'll come back with some grapes when Matthew's on the mend.'

'Any chance of dropping by the recording studio and telling Paul where we are?'

'No problem,' said Reg, clearly relieved to have a good reason to go. 'Catch you later. Let me know how the old feller goes on.'

Ali turned to Jo. 'Are you coming to the chapel with us?'

'Of course I'll come. Why wouldn't I?'

'I thought you had enough of religion when you were in America.'

'Well yes, in some ways. Especially the ways Titus and Aunt Lethe use. But I really liked the Pastor, and Summer Moon.' What was it she had heard in the dream after singing the traditional healing song with Summer Moon? *We are not asking you to believe. We are asking you to open your soul.*

The chapel was a haven of peace after the busy bustle of the hospital. They were the only people there, and sank gratefully into the comfortable chairs.

'I like the stained glass windows,' whispered Jo to Ali.

Breath-taking coloured glass roundels cast their tranquil light upon the room. There was a plaque on the wall explaining that each one was a mandala, based on healing symbols from religions and philosophies worldwide. Jo studied a nearby plan which outlined the history of the Glory Heights site before her eyes were drawn back to the exquisite windows.

'The one in the middle is so beautiful. It reminds me of the healing lotus.' Once, Jo had conjured up a magical, healing lotus flower formed of pure white light. Its delicate petals had shimmered softly, as flashes of rainbows gleamed from within.

'I wish it would appear again, so I could help Matthew.' Jo looked despondent.

'You're young, love. Your healing powers are still developing. All in good time. Meanwhile, he's in safe hands.'

'I can't help worrying, though.'

'Well, that's natural. I'm worried as well. But we all have to be strong.'

'I know.' Jo smiled a rather unconvincing smile at her mother, but even as she did so, she suddenly felt a dark shadow clutch at her heart. She gave an involuntary cry, which she quickly suppressed. Ali was not deceived. She looked concerned.

***I felt it as well, Jo,*** she empathed, completely forgetting that Mary had the same ability. She pounced into their thoughts.

***Me too. What's happening?***

Ali tried to laugh it off. 'What do you expect with three empaths in one place? We're tuning into what's happening to Matthew. If we don't do something to take our minds off it, we'll be experiencing everything that happens during the operation, only without the anaesthetic. I'd really rather not.'

'Summer Moon taught me a healing chant,' suggested Jo, damping down the dread which had risen in her. It had felt for all the world as if the hands of Hell had tried to squeeze the life out of her heart. She forced herself to sound positive. 'Let's sing it together.'

The drugs were taking effect. Matthew was drifting away, looking into the kind, reassuring face of the anaesthetist. He could just make out two women, masked and gowned, entering the room and crossing over to the operating table. *The pioneers*, he thought drowsily. He noticed that one of the two newcomers had beautiful, yet strangely expressionless, cold, almond-shaped eyes. Just before the drug completely took over, the other woman moved into view and he found himself staring into the greenest eyes he had ever seen.

'We meet again, Old Goat,' whispered Lethe Lacuna, and he felt a dark shadow clutch at his heart.

## Chapter Four – The Storyteller

The last notes of the healing chant faded away. An awkward silence fell as Jo, Ali and Mary tried to conceal their rising anxiety. When Mary finally spoke, her concern was matched by her determination.

'Something's wrong. We all know it, so don't let's pretend. I have to see him now.'

'They won't let you see him during the operation,' said Ali.

'Oh? And just how are they going to stop me?' Mary was fierce and formidable. So saying she marched out of the chapel. Jo looked at her mother, who shrugged helplessly.

'Can't just leave her to it,' sighed Ali. 'Come on, Jo.'

For all her years, Mary set a cracking pace as she strode along the wide hospital corridors. Ali and Jo struggled to keep up through a bewildering sequence of twists and turns. 'Nearly there,' Mary said at last. 'I can sense him. He's very close.'

Seemingly lost in a maze of corridors, they turned a corner into a luxuriously carpeted foyer beautifully decorated with nine botanical illustrations of medicinal plants. One in particular caught Jo's eye. She saw a familiar plant with small red flowers. The leaves were green on the top and white and fuzzy underneath. The caption read:

*'Remember, Mugwort, what you made known,  
What you arranged at the Great Proclamation.  
You were called Una, the oldest of herbs,  
you have power against three and against thirty,  
you have power against poison and against infection,  
you have power against the loathsome foe  
roving through the land.'*

*Nine Herbs Charm, 11th century*

Summer Moon had told Jo about mugwort. She tried to remember what the wise old woman, a Native American healer, had said.



Meanwhile Mary was assessing their surroundings. 'This leads to the private wing, I suppose,' she sniffed disapprovingly. 'For the really important people, I don't think. Surely they haven't brought him here? Yet I can sense him so strongly.' Then she swore fluently as she came to a dead end, a lift marked STRICTLY NO ADMITTANCE TO UNAUTHORISED PERSONNEL.

'As soon as there is any news, you'll be the first to know,' Ali said to Mary. 'Let's go back to the waiting room so they know where to find us. Are you coming, Jo? Jo?'

But Jo was somewhere else entirely, remembering the smell of smouldering sage and a cotton patchwork quilt celebrating the Morning Star. Summer Moon's words came back to her.

*This is mugwort. It can stimulate psychic awareness and prophetic dreams. We also believe that when mugwort is burned it makes the bad spirits sick, and they move away.*

Jo smiled to herself. *Just what I need to keep Aunt Lethe at bay. Aunt Lethe; the bad spirit, the loathsome foe.* Her smile faded. Then, as always, Jo felt torn as she remembered Lethe's capacity to dazzle; her intelligence; her beauty. *Don't think about her beauty,* she told herself fiercely.

Jo was so deep in her thoughts she didn't hear the lift door opening and closing until a gentle voice said, 'Excuse me, please.'

A hospital porter, dressed in a smart, violet uniform, smiled as Jo stood aside. He carefully pushed a patient in a wheelchair towards her.

The patient, obviously desperately ill, was a once elegant man in his fifties. He had silver hair, with one black streak, and a black goatee beard. He appeared to be sleeping. Then, as he passed Jo, his grey eyes fluttered open and he stared directly at her.

Despite the man's terrible pallor and skeletal thinness Jo recognised him at once. She was shocked

to the core. *It's Everard Burnley*, she thought. *I didn't know he was dying.*

***It's a closely guarded secret.***

Jo jumped. Everard Burnley had read her mind. And he could emp. She responded immediately.

***That's so sad. I love your books. I've read them all. When I was nine, you signed my copy of Dragonfly River for me. You wrote - To Jo Lakota; Words are only painted fire.*** Jo wasn't entirely sure what the dedication meant, but she loved the sound of it.

***Ah. The great Mark Twain. Well, hold on to it, Jo Lakota. It's about to treble in value.***

Desperate to help, Jo reached out to touch the hand of her favourite writer as he passed. She tried to summon the healing lotus. Everard Burnley's grey eyes widened, and a slow smile briefly transformed his face.

***You are something special, young lady. But, as you no doubt realise, it is far too late for me. I thank you for trying. But I am ready. I am far from willing, because I love this beautiful and terrible life in all its maddening complexity. But it is my time.***

As the wheelchair rounded the corner and disappeared from view, Jo received a final message.

***May I suggest you read chapter three of Scorpion Grass?***

Jo was baffled. The name was familiar to her. It had been the codename for one of Titus and Lethe's loathsome operations, abandoned since Titus discovered repentance. It certainly wasn't the title of one of Everard's books. As she'd said, she had read them all.

'Ground Control to Major Jo,' joked Ali, and Jo came back to earth. She blinked and looked around her, momentarily fazed by her encounter with the great writer. Meanwhile Mary was systematically trying all the doors leading off the foyer, but none would open. She rattled the unyielding doors and cursed roundly. There were security touch pads by each door, but the visitor's

passes didn't activate them. While Mary tried to work out how to bypass them Ali glanced out of the window.

A beautiful Chinese woman with two small children was hurrying across a tranquil courtyard towards a silver-haired man in a wheelchair. The porter left the wheelchair close to a gently cascading fountain, and withdrew tactfully as the man and woman embraced.

'I knew I recognised that man,' said Ali. 'I just couldn't place him. It's Everard Burnley, isn't it?'

Jo followed her mother's gaze and nodded. Everard looked up and waved. He smiled directly at Jo, and for a moment his heart was as open as the sky. They connected at a profound level and Jo was dizzy with the power of their meeting. As if in a dream she caught glimpses of him as a boy, a youth, a man. She saw a regal prince, a beggar, a soldier. She felt wave upon wave of his feelings; his capacity for love, rage, fear and joy was overwhelming. Then he looked away, and the lightning storm of emotion receded. Jo swayed, almost fainting. *I know him, she thought. And he knows me. It is as if we have met before, over and over again, in one lifetime after another.*

'Come on, you two. Let's go back to the waiting room.' The sound of Ali's voice broke through Jo's trance. She tried to focus, aware that her mother was looking at her strangely. Had Ali tuned into Jo's thoughts? If she had, she gave no sign of it.

As they made their way back a breathless nurse came up to them, 'I've been looking for you everywhere,' she said. 'You can see him now.'



Matthew looked so old and vulnerable it made Jo's heart contract. Then he opened his eyes, and his profound intelligence drove the years into hiding. Mary whispered something to him and his face lit up.

'We should go,' said Ali to Jo, trying to be tactful, but she hesitated when she heard Mary telling Matthew how the three of them had felt a dark shadow clutch their hearts.

'Me too,' whispered Matthew, his voice croaky. 'It must have been the anaesthetic. Just as I was going under, I had a dream about Lethe. It was so vivid, as if she was in the room with me. For a moment I panicked. But it was just a dream. Funny that the three of you tuned into it. Anyway, they tell me the operation was a complete success. I'll be right as rain before you know it.'

'You'd better be. We've got a wedding to plan.' Mary's brusque tone was at odds with the joy and relief she clearly felt. She looked around. 'This is a very swish room, Matthew. Any idea how you ended up in the private wing?'

Matthew looked vaguely embarrassed and sounded defensive. 'The nurse told me that one of the medical team was a pupil of mine years ago, recognised me straight away and insisted I should be upgraded as soon as the operation was completed. I was in no condition to argue.'

Ali smiled, masking a growing uneasiness. 'It's a gorgeous room. Flowers, television, a telephone, your own balcony and plenty of interesting books for when you feel better. Relax and enjoy it, Matthew.' She turned to Mary. 'Jo and I are going to get a coffee, as long as you promise to spare Matthew your usual lecture on bastions of privilege.'

'Just this once, it can wait,' replied Mary, and she turned back to her beloved Matthew.

Suddenly it was as if Ali and Jo ceased to exist. 'Come on, Mum,' said Jo. 'Coffee calls.'

A porter was waiting to escort them from the private wing. As soon as they were back in the foyer, Ali's smile was replaced with a frown. 'That was no dream,' she said emphatically. 'Lethe was there. I know she was. I bet she was the one who had his room upgraded. But why?'

'Yes. It's her alright. I wonder...'

'What mayhem she is cooking up.'

'Well, yes, that too, but really I was wondering if...'  
Jo stumbled over the words, 'if she is very scarred.'

Ali sighed. 'She doesn't deserve your sympathy, Jo. Don't let her in.'



'I think that went very well,' said Lethe Lacuna as the operating theatre door closed behind her. She sounded triumphant. 'Our research programme will benefit considerably.'

Bridget's smile did not quite reach her eyes but her voice was warm and concerned. 'Do you need to rest, Madame, or shall we see the patients in the private wing?'

'Why not? We have spent quite long enough with your tired, your poor, your huddled masses. They really are very tedious. I need opulence and comfort.'

Bridget offered Lethe her arm, and they walked slowly towards the foyer that led to the private wing. Lethe, still masked and gowned, leaned heavily on her companion. Clearly it was an effort to walk.

Masking her need to rest Lethe stopped in front of one of the botanical illustrations based on the *Nine Herbs Charm*. She read the caption aloud.

*'And you, Plantain, mother of herbs,  
open from the east, mighty inside.  
Over you chariots creaked, over you queens rode,  
over you brides cried out, over you bulls snorted.  
You withstood all of them, you dashed against them.  
May you likewise withstand poison and infection  
and the loathsome foe roving through the land.'*

She laughed. 'An impressive testimonial for a rather inconspicuous plant. Not to be confused with the other plantain, a type of banana, as I am sure you know, Bridget. As I recall, it can be useful in cases of bronchitis, snakebite and poison-ivy rashes, but *withstanding the loathsome foe* puts it into a quite different league. I must test it on my dear sister one of these days. Shall we continue?'

On the pillar at the side of the lift was a touch pad and keyboard. Lethe typed in a password then rested

her hand on the screen. 'Fingerprint recognition?' hazarded Bridget.

'Much more sophisticated,' said Lethe. 'The screen is covered with thousands of miniscule probes, invisible to the naked eye. As we speak one probe is taking a minute droplet of blood. Another probe takes skin cells. A third detects perspiration. I don't feel a thing. And now the machine is analysing the results and comparing them with my DNA profile. Voila.'

The lift doors opened. As they stepped inside Bridget remained concerned. 'But surely someone with a drop of your blood could put it on the touch pad, pretend to be you and breach the security system.'

The lift rose smoothly, whisper-quiet. Lethe laughed. 'Don't worry, Bridget. Such a person would have no idea where to place the samples. The probes operate at random. So the chances of placing the correct sample in the right spot are non-existent. If any of the three probes fails to make the appropriate contact, the alarm will sound and the whole private wing goes into lockdown. Covering the surface won't work either. If more than three of the probes are activated, that too will set off the alarm. It is very precise.'

'Your twin sister could do it. Her DNA will match yours.'

Lethe sighed. She obviously found Bridget's persistence rather irritating. 'Yes. That is a flaw. Fortunately there is no chance of her deducing my password. Bridget was about to object further, but Lethe silenced her with an imperious gesture. 'Enough. You worry too much, Bridget.' The lift stopped and the doors silently slid open. The two women stepped out into the corridor.

Smokey didn't bother looking up as the door opened.

'Get out,' he said. 'And take my so-called sister with you.' His voice seethed with hatred.

Lethe Lacuna laughed. 'Such a churlish reception. Yet I am using all my considerable expertise to ensure

the restoration of your admittedly rather limited faculties.'

'Having done your best to destroy them in the first place.'

'If it were left to me, I would complete the task. However, Mr. Stigmurus is adamant that your wretched life should be spared – enhanced even. And for the moment, what Mr. Stigmurus says, goes. I am a mere vessel to his sacred purpose.'

'A poisoned chalice, more like.'

Lethe appeared genuinely amused. 'My, you are feeling better. I must send Beth to visit you again.'

'She comes because she wants to.'

'Of course she does. Her concern for you is touching. And almost certainly genuine.'

'Bitch.'

Bridget had been silent throughout this exchange but she bridled at the insult to her mentor.

'Watch your language, Smokey. You know Mother hated that kind of talk.'

For a moment, Smokey was speechless, then he erupted. 'Don't you dare mention our mother, Bridget. What do you think she would say if she knew about all that terrible stuff you helped them do to all those poor kids?'

Bridget looked bewildered. 'But that was necessary research!' She faltered for a moment, as if some deeply buried memories were struggling to the surface, then her face cleared and she smiled an almost radiant smile. 'I was a sinner, Smokey, but now I have been transformed into Glory, and my sins have been forgiven. We do good work in the world. Why don't you join us? Mother would have liked that.'

Smokey was furious. 'She is not dead, Bridget. Stop talking of her in the past tense.' Bridget gasped. She started to speak but Smokey kept talking. 'Don't you realise Lethe Lacuna is not your friend? She has messed about with your memory like she did with Mum's.'

Bridget looked absolutely horrified. 'Oh, Smokey, there is nothing wrong with my memory. If you can't

remember that our own mother is dead, then there is something terribly wrong with yours. Please let us help you.'

'If it wasn't tragic, it would be funny. You help me? You're just a robot, Bridget; no, a monster. Doctor Frankenstein here has created you to do whatever she wants. She made you forget Mum and then told you your mother was dead. She's evil.'

Lethe's eyes sparkled with malicious enjoyment. 'All this from the boy who nearly killed me and left poor Mr. Stigmurus for dead. Your claim to the high moral ground is frankly risible.'

Smokey moved so quickly Lethe had no time to move away. 'At least I'm not afraid to show my face in public,' he spat, and he tore away her mask.

A terrible silence followed. Smokey recoiled from the devastation of Lethe's beauty. Her once-perfect skin was a mass of scar tissue, a livid relief map of agony. Her exquisite mouth was twisted; her whole face pitted and swollen. Only her magnificent emerald eyes served as a reminder of her former glory.

When Lethe spoke her voice was deadly calm. 'Please hand me your mask, Bridget.' She covered her scars, then turned to Smokey. 'When Mr. Stigmurus is no longer able to protect you, and rest assured, that day will come, I will seek you out. Then you will remember your time trapped in the Mirror Maze as if it were Paradise.'

'You'll have to find me first.'

Lethe struck like a snake. 'But you will be here!' She laughed, but there was no amusement in the sound and with that, she swept out.

Bridget lingered as if she wanted to say something, but then changed her mind and quickly followed Lethe. She hurried to catch up. 'I am so sorry, Madame,' she gasped. 'He does not know you like I do.'

Lethe was all magnanimity. 'Your odious brother is not your responsibility, dear Bridget. I'm sure you would prefer to forget that ugly little scene.'

'Yes, I would. I couldn't bear what he said about our mother... and calling me a monster.'



'You only have to ask,' smiled Lethe as she invoked her power to induce forgetfulness. 'Let us both think of more pleasant things than your bothersome brother. We have other, more grateful patients to visit. But first I would like to see the latest beneficiary of the Heartsease programme. I believe this is her room.'

Together they walked over to the bed where a blonde girl lay sleeping. Lethe frowned.

'But I know this girl. Her name is Lucy. What is a common street fighter doing in the private wing?'

Bridget studied the notes at the foot of the bed. 'It says she was admitted for a routine appendectomy, but there were complications and her heart failed. The Heartsease procedures were completed successfully, but she was comatose before admission and remains so.'

Lethe took the notes and read them for herself. Her eyes shone. 'Comatose! Such research possibilities,' she breathed. 'I must confer with her medical team.' She rang a bell by the bedside, and a senior nurse appeared promptly.

Madame Lacuna! We are honoured by your visit,' smiled the nurse. 'How can I help?'

'This is a fascinating case. I would like to review the case files for this patient, before and after the crisis that necessitated the Heartsease implementation.'

The nurse hesitated before replying. Her smile had vanished and her face was anxious. 'I'm afraid that won't be possible,' she replied. 'All information regarding this patient has been classified.'

'What? Have you forgotten who I am? On whose authority?'

The nurse looked relieved to be able to answer with confidence. 'Why, Mr. Stigmurus, Madame. He has taken a close interest in this poor young lady.'

'Has he indeed. Well, well. Rest assured, so shall I.'

Lethe studied Lucy more carefully. She carefully pulled back the bedcover. 'So was her baby a boy or a girl?'

'Baby?' The nurse looked mystified. 'What baby?'

Lethe's eyes narrowed. 'I have devoted large sections of my career to obstetrics, Nurse. This young woman is clearly lactating. So where is her baby?'

**PROMO COPY**

## Chapter Five - Home Truths

Mirabel had never seen Titus so angry. His formidable power and energy had returned in full force. He towered over her. 'I have asked. I have pleaded. I have begged. I even wept. No more, Mirabel. You will tell me.'

'It's better if you never know, Titus.'

'What do you mean, *It's better if I never know*? But I demand to know! What have you done with her?'

Mirabel stood her ground. 'I promise you she is safe. And I've every intention that she will stay that way. So no, I won't tell you where she is, or where she is going.'

'Don't make me force you to tell me,' said Titus. A vein in his temple was throbbing dangerously.

Mirabel laughed defiantly. 'Don't you dare threaten me, Titus. What did you have in mind? Torture?'

'Don't rule it out, Mirabel.'

From another man, the words might have been reckless bravado. Not so with Titus. Mirabel knew the threat was not empty. For a moment her resolution faltered. She looked afraid. Every year of her long and often wicked life was cruelly etched on her face. Even so, she summoned up the courage to face him down.

'You try torture, and I'll go right ahead and die on you. Then where will you be? On your last bleeding legs, is where. Well over eighty and no way of keeping young any more. Anything happens to me and you can kiss your precious formula goodbye. Not to mention my deathbed curse. I got a nice line in curses, Titus, and don't you forget it. One of my little talents that came in very handy before you turned all sanctimonious and God-bothering.'

The mention of God knocked the wind out of his sails. He sat down abruptly and heavily. 'Forgive me, Lord,' he prayed, then turned to Mirabel. He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. 'How did this come about? You are so dear to me, yet for a moment there we were at each other's throats. Why won't you trust me? When have I ever let you down?'

Mirabel considered her answer carefully. 'You mean apart from the time when you left me for that trollop?'

Titus sighed deeply. 'Oh, Mirabel. I thought we had left all that behind us. I am so, so sorry.' There was a pause, then a flash of his old fire returned. 'Though I remember you found comfort soon enough in the arms of some worthless good-for-nothing.'

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees. 'Oh?' said Mirabel icily. 'And which worthless good-for-nothing are we talking about here?'

'I heard there were so many, Mirabel. A man loses count.'

'Well, I just wonder who told you that. That floozy, no doubt. Though even a moron like her should be able to count to one, Titus.'

'Just one? You do surprise me. Still, one feckless fly-by-night is all it took.'

'All it took to what?'

'Really, Mirabel. It hardly needs spelling out. To get you pregnant, of course.'

Mirabel drew a very, very deep breath. 'Well, Titus. You're right. You said it. It only took one. And would you like to know the name of this double-crossing feckless fly-by-night?'

'It scarcely matters now, but yes. I have often wondered.'

'Well, stay in your chair, Buster. Wouldn't want you falling over. The name of the worthless, good-for-nothing, feckless fly-by-night, rotten ratfink is...' Mirabel paused for maximum effect. '...none other than, to give him his full title, Obersturmbannführer Titus Stigmurus.'

Titus looked as if he had been hit in the stomach with a medicine ball. Just one word escaped his lips. 'Me?'

'Unless you knows of another Obersturmbannführer Titus Stigmurus.'

'Darlene was my daughter?'

Mirabel nodded.

'Why didn't you tell me? We waited so long to have a child...'

Mirabel was furious. She let rip. 'Damn right we did. Why would I tell you? You'd gone off with that baggage. The not very Right, not very Honourable Anna Belinda Featherstonehaugh. All fur coat and no knickers, as I recall. Still, she met her come-uppance in the end when Her Ladyship Lethe Lacuna waltzed into view and fancied you for breakfast, so that's some consolation.'

'Never mind about them, Mirabel. Why didn't you come to me for help?'

'I didn't want your pity and I didn't want your guilt, Titus. After you left what happened to me was none of your bleedin' business. You only came looking for me years later, when you needed my formula.'

'Didn't I have a right to know I'd fathered a child?'

'Dunno. Dunno if a sperm's got any rights.' Titus winced. Mirabel turned the knife. 'Ask Her Ladyship with her artificial insemination programme. I believe that is the correct pronunciation?' Mirabel spat the words.

'I would like to have known I had a daughter, Mirabel. And maybe she would have wanted to know her father. You raised her in poverty, and there was no need. If I had been there when she met Darren's father...'

'We don't ever, ever, talk of him.' Mirabel's face was full of hate. 'Me and Darren sorted him out good and proper.'

Another thought struck Titus. 'So Darren is my grandson.'

'Give that man a coconut.'

Titus slumped in his seat. He looked old and tired. 'It's a lot to take in. Of course, we must find Darren and...'

Mirabel interrupted. 'Well, hold on to your hat, Titus, 'cos there's summat else. I can't be a hundred per cent sure, but I'm as near as dammit certain our Darren was the daddy.'

'Daddy?' Titus looked mystified for a moment, then realisation dawned. 'Darren is the father of Lucy's baby?'

'I reckon. And yes, that means we – you and me – we've got a great-granddaughter. For real. Not pretend.'

'Then she should be with us!'

Mirabel's voice was urgent. 'Think for a moment, Titus. That little girl, Bella, I calls her, and you bonded in a moment. I was there. I saw it. It was magic. You fell for her, hook line and sinker and it went both ways. I'm talking about love here.'

'But that's wonderful!'

'No. it ain't. You know love's one of the ingredients in the formula what keeps you going. So far it's only me what's been daft enough to love you, Titus. If Bella grows up loving you, then she's in danger.'

'Danger? From me? I would never hurt her!'

'Not even to keep on staying alive?' Mirabel's tone was almost conversational. 'Because it does hurt, Titus. Loving you – keeping you going – it does hurt. And you do so want to keep living. When I'm gone, you'll be tempted to replace my love with Bella's. I don't think you can be trusted.'

Titus looked grey. When he eventually spoke, his voice was sombre. 'Yes. I want eternal life. But not at the expense of my great grand-daughter. I promise you, Mirabel, I will find another way. I won't harm Bella.'

Mirabel gave him a searching look. 'I believe you, Titus. I really do. So that just leaves Her Ladyship.'

'Lethe?'

Mirabel nodded. 'Now she don't want you popping your clogs 'cos of all this prophecy tosh. And she won't care about hurting Bella. So she can't never, ever know about her. 'Cos if she does, she won't rest 'til she finds her. And that woman ain't going nowhere near my – our – great-granddaughter. If you don't know where she is, she can't winkle it out of you.'

There was a long pause while Titus thought deeply. When he spoke, his voice cracked with emotion. 'I'll do anything to keep her safe. But Mirabel – we must act with honour at all times. You must promise me that.'

Mirabel crossed her fingers behind her back. 'Right. I promise to do my best.'

Titus looked relieved. 'Thank you. So how can I help?'

'I've been working out a plan. Bella ain't gonna be brought up in no institution, for a kick-off. I wants her to have a proper family, and I've got an idea about that. First, I'm going to need shedloads of money. And no questions asked.' Titus waved a hand in assent. 'Second, I'll need Sebastian. He's loyal to you, ain't he?'

'I pay him to be loyal to me,' said Titus drily.

'Only he seems devoted to Her bleedin' Ladyship.'

'Lethe pays him to be devoted.'

'Who pays him the most?' demanded Mirabel.

'That would be me,' answered Titus.

'Good. And third, him and me's going on a little trip and we'll need one of your fancy aeroplanes and a fast car... OK so far?' Titus nodded. Mirabel glanced at him, saw he was lost in thought then said the next bit very fast. 'I might have to tidy up a few loose ends after...' She glanced at Titus for his reaction, and was shocked by what she saw. He hardly seemed to have noticed what she said. 'Why, Titus! Are you crying?'

He nodded, his tears falling freely. 'It's so painful, Mirabel. I never knew love could be so painful.'

Mirabel sighed. 'They don't tell you that, Titus. But yes. Love's an absolute bugger.'

## Chapter Six – Question Mark

The queue in front of the bookshop seemed to go on forever. Jo and Sam were close to the front, having camped overnight on the pavement. The great adventure was somewhat diminished by hourly parental patrols, but even so it was fun to be there. Behind them stretched a long line of chattering youngsters, looking as if they were on their way to a fancy dress party. Many wore fantastic headdresses – butterflies, moths and dragonflies being particularly popular.

Sam looked at the tiny dragonfly badge in Jo's lapel. 'Well, you certainly pushed the boat out, Jo!'

Jo laughed. 'It was either this or my mum's idea of a grasshopper costume. She had that look in her eyes. I remember when I was a camel in the Nativity play. She covered an old beanbag to look like a hump, but the stitching came undone and I left a trail of polystyrene beads everywhere I went. I started out enormous and by the curtain call I was scrawny. I really stood out – but not in a good way!'

Sam smiled. She was wearing a hornet costume with bold yellow and brown stripes. On most people it would have looked ridiculous, but Sam just looked stylish.

'You look great,' said Jo. 'But then, you always do. You can just chuck on any old thing and look amazing. I don't know how you do it! I am so envious.'

'Well, I'm envious of you,' answered Sam. 'You're the one who actually met him. I can't believe he's gone.'

'It's so sad. I really liked him. It felt...' Jo paused.

'Go on,' prompted Sam.

'It felt as if we connected – as if I'd known him forever.' She screwed up her courage and asked the question that had been on her mind since encountering Everard Burnley. 'Sam, I've been wondering... do you believe in reincarnation?'

Sam shook her head emphatically. 'No, I do not. The Glory Gang believes we only live once on this



earth, but after we die the soul is judged and we go to Heaven or Hell.'

'Is that really what you believe?' persisted Jo. 'Hell is a terrible idea.'

'Well, I've been transformed into Glory, so of course I believe it. And Hell isn't an idea. It's real. And yes, it's terrible. But so is sin.'

Jo sighed. 'But wouldn't a loving God want to spare his or her people?'

Sam looked slightly cross. Religion was an increasingly thorny subject for the two friends. The issue of God's gender was especially fraught. 'If you're so interested, why don't you come to our discussion evenings? We could look into reincarnation, if that's on your mind. You'd be very welcome.'

'Even though I haven't been transformed into Glory?'

'I'm sure you have, really, Jo. You just don't know it.'

Jo tried not to sound as irritated as she felt. 'I think I might have noticed,' she said eventually.

Jo's friends still went to the Glory Gang meetings, but she wanted nothing more to do with the organisation. For one thing, there was the vexed matter of the final concert in America. Everyone's memories of were blurry, except for hers. Even her parents were unsure about what had happened. Apart from Jo, everyone agreed that something miraculous had taken place, but no-one was quite sure what.

Sam's eyes shone as she remembered. Or thought she remembered. 'I saw the Child of Glory, Jo! One minute you were standing there, the next she had taken your place. She was surrounded by light and so beautiful. You must have seen her.'

'No, I did not,' said Jo firmly. 'It was a trick – Aunt Lethe and Titus trying to get everyone to believe in the child and their stupid prophecy.'

'Why would they do that?' asked Sam, her tone reproachful.

'So they can control people and use them,' said Jo wearily.

'Since you know everything, tell me how they did it, then.'

'Smoke and mirrors – just a trick of the light,' replied Jo, flippantly.

Sam was irritated. 'You're so cynical, Jo. Ever since Beth found Smokey you've been all moody. You won't change my mind, though. I know what I saw.'

'Actually, Hawk and I found Smokey,' said Jo indignantly. Then, because she was nothing if not fair minded, she added, 'But Beth was really brave. We couldn't have got him away from that terrible fairground without her.'

'She visits him every day. All the Glory Gang are praying for him. He's still not right, but not as bad as he was.'

'I know. I visit him too.' As soon as she said it, Jo knew she sounded petty. There was an awkward silence,

Jo stared into space, trying not to think of Smokey. Or Beth. Or of Smokey and Beth.

Jo studied the huge banner above the shop doorway. Right in the centre was a publicity photograph of Everard Burnley. *He looks so well there*, thought Jo, sadly. On each side of him were three book covers. 'Which is your favourite?' Jo asked Sam, trying to mend the rift.

Sam took the olive branch gratefully. 'I loved all six, but *Hornet Hollow* was my absolute favourite. I bet yours was *Dragonfly River*!'

'Well, it was when I was nine, but now it's *Spider Road*,' said Jo.

'Really? I much preferred *Moth Mountain*,' replied Sam. '*Spider Road* didn't seem to go anywhere.'

'Oh, I love *Moth Mountain* too. I guess *Spider Road* is a bit of an in-between – you need to have read the others to understand what's happening, and a lot of the plotlines don't get resolved until later. Whereas the rest you can read as separate books.'

'Well, apart from *Grasshopper Meadow*,' laughed Sam. 'That one was crazy! I had to keep checking the earlier books to see how it all fits together!'

Jo laughed. 'Yes, *Grasshopper Meadow* is brilliant, as well! I can't decide! *Spider Road* just really gets to me; it makes me cry every time I read it.'

'Me too! That's why I don't like it!

'I guess that's something else we see differently,' said Jo, gently.

Sam paused a moment. Then let it go. 'That just leaves *Butterfly Valley*. Probably my least favourite.'

'Mine as well,' said Jo, and the awkward moment passed as they continued to discuss the merits of the well-loved books.

Sam looked at the banner. Everard Burnley was holding a large book-shaped parcel, wrapped in brown paper with a big red question mark on it. 'So the big mystery is, what's the title of the last book? Did you enter the competition?'

Jo shook her head.

'Why ever not? I did! I think it might be something to do with beetles or bees.'

'*Beetle Drive*,' joked Jo. 'My Gran used to take me to them when I was little. I think she had special dice – she always managed to roll a six and then she could get started and draw the body. Five for the head...'

'Oooh! I remember! Four for each wing; three for one of the six legs and two got you one antenna. But what did you get for one?'

Jo thought for a bit, then remembered. 'One for an eye.'

Sam was back on possible titles. 'I think *Bee Line* fits the pattern pretty well. The name of an insect and some sort of location.'

'Spiders aren't insects,' objected Jo. 'Eight legs, not six.'

'You're right. Technically. So the pattern's a bit shaky. Or is it?' Sam grinned. She obviously knew the answer and was relishing her secret knowledge. 'I was doing my biology homework, and came across the word *arthropod*.'

'Never heard of it,' smiled Jo. 'What's that when it's at home?'

'Can't remember exactly - I'd have to look it up again - but I know it's a group that includes insects, arachnids and crustaceans. So there is a proper pattern to the titles.'

'He was like that,' said Jo. 'He used words precisely. And another thing - he never talked down to us.'

'So why didn't you enter the competition?'

Jo felt a bit awkward. 'Because I think I know the answer. I'm pretty sure he let it slip when we were talking. So I had a bit of an unfair advantage.'

'But you could have won! A set of seven silver badges - all the bugs - yours for the taking! Fancy not entering!'

'It wouldn't have felt right,' mumbled Jo. 'Anyway, we're in the first twenty in the queue, so we're bound to get one of the signed copies of the new book.'

'The publishers didn't waste any time cashing in on his death,' said Sam, disapprovingly. 'He's been dead for less than a week.'

'I think he'd known he was dying for quite a while. There was time enough to prepare.' Jo looked around her. 'This queue is getting longer and longer by the minute. Just imagine - this is happening at every bookshop in the land!'

Jo realised that Sam wasn't really listening to her. She was studying the queue intently. 'Oh look! There's Beth! And is that Smokey with her? It's really difficult to be sure.'

Jo followed the direction of Sam's gaze. 'I think so,' she said, uncertainly. 'You know what he's like for merging into the background.'

'If it is him, it's thanks to Beth,' said Sam. 'He hardly ever leaves the hospital - I know she's been trying to get him out and about a bit more. Looks like she made a breakthrough! Oooh - I think they're opening the doors!'

There was a sudden surge as the crowd moved forward. The bookstore had erected barriers to avoid a crush, so people had to enter the store in single file. Jo did a quick head count. 'Looks like you're number nineteen, and I'm twenty. Phew. That's a bit close.'

The queue moved slowly forward. The bookshop staff looked a bit apprehensive as well as pleased at the mass of people waiting. Beneath a huge banner saying SCORPION GRASS piles of books were neatly stacked, ready for Everard Burnley's devoted readers.

'See! Scorpions have eight legs! I was right,' laughed Sam, but Jo wasn't laughing. The title was all-too familiar to her. Not so long ago her Aunt Lethe had obliterated Jo's memories of her family, then masqueraded as her mother. She and Titus Stigmurus had manipulated Jo into using her talents to identify candidates for their wicked experiments. Project Scorpion Grass had been the real agenda behind the Centre for Utilisation and Training.

Had Everard Burnley been aware of the horrible things she'd been forced to do? What if the book exposed the entire affair, including her actions as Jocasta, Lethe's imaginary daughter? Jo felt increasingly uneasy as the queue inched ever closer.

Now there was only Sam in front of Jo. The pretty dark-haired manager handed Sam her signed copy, and Jo moved up to collect the last one.

***Tough luck, Jo. Sorry.***

***Smokey?***

And before she knew it, Smokey was in front of her, and the manager handed him the last precious signed book.

Jo was speechless. When Smokey turned to her and shrugged, she wanted to hit him.

'I promised Beth,' he said. It wasn't much of an apology, but it was all she was going to get.

Sam was livid. She yelled after Smokey as he high-tailed out of the shop. 'You snake-in-the-grass!' Then she turned to Jo. 'Honestly! Johanna Angelina Lakota, are you going to let him get away with that?'

'Nothing I can do about it,' said Jo, calmly. In a way, Smokey had given her a reprieve; his rude behaviour had completely overshadowed her rising anxiety.

'Come on, Sam. We're holding up the queue.'

'Excuse me... did you say Lakota?' The manager reached beneath the counter. 'This was left for you.' She smiled and to Jo's surprise handed her a parcel wrapped in brown paper with a red question mark.

Jo looked in bewilderment at the package. 'Who is it from?' she asked, but the manager just shrugged.

'Hurry up and open it,' urged Sam. 'I'm dying to know what's inside!'

'Not here,' said Jo. She had no idea what was in the parcel, but she was suddenly absolutely certain of three things: it was connected with Everard Burnley; it was of great importance; and the fewer people who knew about it, the better. 'When we get home.'

Sam pulled a face. 'I promised Mum I'd meet her and Dad in town. He's got a physio appointment at the hospital, and it's so hard for her managing his wheelchair on her own.'

'I'll help,' offered Jo, but Sam shook her head.

'Thanks, but we'll manage. You just make sure you tell me what's in the mystery package the minute I get back!'

'Is that it?' asked Sam, disbelieving and disappointed. It was some hours later and she and Jo were looking at a large lump of hardened clay. 'That's not very exciting!'

Jo laughed. 'There was a signed copy of the book and a pen as well.'

Jo had been thrilled when she saw the dedication. *To Jo. A look is the fire itself.* She showed it to Sam.

'What does that mean?' Sam looked puzzled.

Jo opened her precious copy of *Dragonfly River*. 'It goes with this,' she said.

Sam read the two dedications out loud. '*Words are only painted fire; a look is the fire itself.*' She looked perplexed. 'Still no idea what it means!'

'Just reading about fire isn't the same as experiencing it, maybe.'

Sam was looking at the pen. 'Hey – did you know this is a torch as well?' She shone a beam of light at

the ceiling. 'Hang on – there's another button. Wow! Now the light's purple!' She playfully shone the light over her friend, then gasped. She turned off the torch quickly.

'Sorry, Jo.'

Jo took a moment to realise what had happened. 'The bloody Blaschko lines,' she sighed. 'Well, you've seen them before. In America.'

'When the Child of Glory appeared.'

Jo sighed again, this time with exasperation. 'There was no Child of Glory, Sam. It was just me. Lethe made everyone think I was the Child by shining ultraviolet light on me and the lines glowed. Like now.' She demonstrated by shining the light on her arm. Without the light Jo's skin merely appeared faintly discoloured, but with it intricate whorls and lines appeared to glow.

'So you are the Child,' breathed Sam. 'The one branded with secret signs, who will lead the Rainbow Warriors. Bridget told us all about the prophecy.'

'Did she now. Well, I am not the Child of Glory. I'm just me. I've got lines on my skin because I have two lots of DNA. Before I was born, I had a twin. The twin died and I absorbed his or her DNA. We've gone through this.'

'I remember. You're a chimera.' Jo nodded. 'Well, that's pretty miraculous.'

'I'll let you know if I start sprouting wings,' said Jo flippantly.

Sam's face was set and stubborn. 'Something miraculous happened in America. I know what I saw, Jo. What did Everard Burnley write in your book? *A look is the fire itself.*'

'He wasn't referring to me or the damn Child of Glory. Let's drop it, Sam.'

Neither girl knew how to handle the rift that was forming between them. Eventually Sam picked up the piece of clay. 'So what's this about, then?' She examined it carefully, then smiled. 'Oh! I get it! It's a mould!' The awkwardness retreated somewhat. 'We need some plaster of Paris.'

'Not strong enough,' answered Jo, relieved that the conversation had moved on. 'Metal would be better. I thought of melting down some of my Dad's lead soldiers, but he probably wouldn't like that idea much.'

'Lead's a bit soft. You need something harder. Silver, perhaps.'

'I'm not melting down my great-grandmother's locket,' said Jo indignantly, her hand flying to her neck.

'I didn't mean that – an old silver spoon should do it. But we can't really go nicking the family silver!'

'No, but we could pick up an odd one at a charity shop!' Jo was really animated now. She could sense another adventure unfolding.

'Have you ever melted silver?' asked Sam, doubtfully. 'We can't just do it on your mum's stove.'

'No, but I reckon I know just the man for the job,' laughed Jo. 'Reg will know what to do. Let's go and see him!'

Sam looked awkward. 'I promised Mum I'd sit with Dad so she can get her hair done...'

'That's OK,' smiled Jo. 'It doesn't have to be right now! When would be good for you?'

It seemed like an age before Sam answered. 'I think I'll pass,' she said eventually.

Jo tried to look as if she didn't mind. She kept her voice light. 'OK. I'll let you know how it goes.'

Sam saw Jo trying not to mind. She couldn't bear to short-change her friend. She tried to explain. 'The thing is, Jo, Mum disapproves of Reg. The riots were understandable, back when VergissMeinNicht ran everything and did such awful things. But she is really impressed with the Glory Foundation, and can't understand why the Rioters can't see the good work they do. She's sure Dad would say the same. If he could.' Her voice was anguished.

Jo thought for a long time before she replied. 'Their name is the Righteous, Sam, not Rioters. Titus Stigmurus twisted the meaning deliberately, and he controls the majority of the News networks. I do know that the Foundation is doing a lot of good in the world but I've seen Titus and Lethe in action, and I will never



trust them. He may have repented, but she hasn't, not by a long chalk, and a lot of people would rather follow her than him.'

Sam sighed. She looked very forlorn. 'Have a bit of faith, Jo.'

Jo let that pass. 'I don't want to cause trouble between you and your family, Sam. We'll just have to agree to differ. Friends don't have to agree about everything!'



After Sam had gone, Jo drew the curtains. She slowly took off her clothes and stood, naked, in front of the wardrobe mirror. She switched on the ultraviolet light and studied her reflection in the eerie purple glow. The Blaschko lines shone softly in the darkness. She stood stock still for a couple of minutes, just staring. Her mother's words came back to her.

*'If people call you a freak, are you going to agree with them? Yes, you are different. So what. Choose to see the beauty, Jo.'*

Jo's expression was sad, then fierce. Seeing the beauty was easier said than done, but as the mauve light played softly over her skin, she caught a glimmer of her mother's meaning. She straightened her shoulders.

As she turned to put her clothes back on the beam of light shone on the cover of *Scorpion Grass*. Before the cover had shown a blue flower on a plain black background. Now a rough image of a pentagon glowed luminous in the darkness.

## Chapter Seven – Layers of Meaning

'You want me to do what, girlie?' Reg looked and sounded stern, but his eyes were laughing.

Jo put the lump of clay and a tarnished serving spoon on the table. 'I want you to melt this old spoon, and use this clay mould to cast me a key! Please, Reg!'

Jo tried her best winning smile. Reg grunted. 'So where's it for, this key of yours?'

'No idea. But Everard Burnley wanted me to have it and do something important with it! Can you do it, Reg? Please?'

'You mean, find a propane torch and silica melting dish, not to mention the mask and whatnot? Course I can. The Righteous have done a bit of melting down in their time. I suppose you want it done yesterday.'

'Yes, please!'

'Anything else while I'm working miracles?'

'Well... are you any good at riddles? When I met Everard Burnley, he told me to look at chapter three of *Scorpion Grass*.'

Reg stopped examining the clay mould and looked directly at Jo. 'Scorpion Grass? You mean...'

'No, it's nothing to do with CUT, Reg, trust me. I was afraid of that too. It's the title of a book for children written by Everard Burnley.'

Reg relaxed. 'I've heard of him. And he's the one who told you to read this chapter? You do get around, girlie. So have you read it?'

'Yes. At first I thought it was just a weird poem, but now I'm sure it's a riddle.' Jo quoted from the book.

*I dreamed of limestone layered with shale.  
The Pillars of Hercules framed the place  
Where the son of Poseidon lived and reigned  
Until earthquake and flood left never a trace.*

Reg looked at her blankly. 'Sounds like brain work to me. You'll be needing Matthew or Mary for that. Or Brenda. She's brilliant at crosswords.'

Jo hesitated. Something had been niggling at the back of her mind ever since she had met up with Reg and Brenda in America. Brenda had spoken of Titus and Lethe with real loathing. She'd said, *There's a vengeful side to me that wants them to suffer forever in a rat-infested dungeon.*

But then, when Titus joined them a few moments later, Brenda seemed genuinely pleased to see him. At the time Jo had thought it odd. Even now she couldn't fathom it.

'Brenda's a bit special, isn't she,' said Jo carefully.

'She's my right-hand woman. I trust her implicitly,' answered Reg. 'I'm lost without her.'

Jo realised this was probably not the moment to share her concerns about Brenda with Reg. She changed tack.

'We all think you'd make a lovely couple,' she said boldly.

'Ah well,' said Reg, and his eyes were no longer laughing. 'Brenda's husband might not be too keen on that idea.'

'I didn't know she was married,' said Jo in astonishment.

'Well, she is.'

'Any children?'

'No.' The word was said with emphasis.

Jo glimpsed deep, unspoken feelings before Reg glared at her fiercely. 'Keep out my head, girly, or you can make your own key. Message received, soldier?'

'Received and understood. Roger and out, Reg.'

'You lot with your weird powers. Emping and reading people's thoughts. Dunno how your poor dad stands it. I told him straight, it gives me the willies.'

'He said. He also explained your theory about Titus being able to enhance some things and distort others.'

'Titus the Twister, the King of Corruption,' spat Reg. 'Thing is, you never know which way it'll go. I don't reckon he can entirely control it – fat lot of good that is. He might meet some dear old duck and they could turn into an angel or a demon.'

Jo felt her heart sink. Perhaps this was why Brenda's reactions to Titus were so contradictory. And if he was somehow twisting her hatred of him *and* her loyalty to Reg then the awful thought came to her that Brenda could be the mole who kept leaking the secrets of the Righteous to their enemies.

*I would stake my life on Brenda's loyalty to Reg and the Righteous,* thought Jo. *But if Titus manages to twist her allegiance, he could find out anything he wanted to know. Loyalty's like breathing to Brenda. I bet she has no idea it's even happening.*

'Don't look so glum,' exclaimed Reg. 'I didn't mean to bite your head off. I'm just a grumpy old codger. Take no notice of me. Now scram, girlie. I'd best make a start on this key of yours.'



Later that evening Jo went to visit Matthew. He was asleep when she arrived, but opened his eyes the moment she reached his bedside. He smiled warmly, but looked drawn and drained.

Jo explained the reason for her visit. 'Are you sure you're feeling well enough? Reg said it made his brain hurt and that it's right up your street. Take your mind off being cooped up in here.'

'Three cheers for Reg,' responded Matthew fervently. 'This is a wonderful hospital, but I miss being quietly at home with Mary and Sergeant.' He sighed deeply. 'I also miss being young, strong and healthy. As Bette Davis said, *Old age is not for sissies. Best to not dwell on that. I must not lapse into melancholy so an intellectual challenge is just what the doctor should have ordered. I do have one question, though, before we begin in earnest. If you have no idea what the riddle means, doesn't it ruin the rest of the story?'*

'It bugged me for a while,' agreed Jo, 'then I just decided to forget about it and that was fine. I enjoyed the story even though chapter three is a complete mystery. When we work it out, I'll need to read the book again! But I often do that anyway. It's amazing what you miss first time round.'

'Good books work on many levels. How exciting to think you will re-read *Scorpion Grass* and find new layers of meaning. Time to begin, I think. Fire away.'

Jo handed Matthew a copy of the riddle. 'It's called *Mag Mell*, whoever she is. There's no-one in the book of that name.'

Matthew laughed. 'Mag Mell isn't a person, Jo, but a place. A mythical paradise under the sea. A place where sickness and death don't exist.' He looked wistful. 'If only. Go on.'

Jo read the riddle out loud. Matthew closed his eyes, but was concentrating intently.

*I dreamed of limestone layered with shale.  
The Pillars of Hercules framed the place  
Where the son of Poseidon lived and reigned  
Until earthquake and flood left never a trace.*

*A tidings of magpies, seven in all,  
A city for Bertie, where peacocks roam.  
Pipe down soldier! Tokio's listening.  
The bookbinder's saint is right at home.*

*Beneath all the trappings of power and glory  
Lie the Lazar bones, deep in the clay.  
An invisible path for invisible souls,  
Go beyond heartsease to find the way.*

*My soul is steeped in sorrow's mysteries.  
Oh I leape up to my God. Who pulls me doune?*

At the end of the poem there was a very long pause. So long, in fact, that Jo began to wonder if Matthew had fallen asleep. When he opened his eyes there was a great sadness within them. 'Poor soul,' he said. 'Steeped in sorrow's mysteries. A reference to Keats' *Ode on Melancholy*. Do you know it?'

'I think we did it at school,' said Jo, but without any real conviction.

Matthew sighed again. 'There's a poetry anthology next to the encyclopaedia. Please pass it to me.' Jo did

so. He leafed through the book until he found what he wanted. 'An astonishing poem. This is the final couplet.

*His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,  
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.*

Do you know who the mighty woman with the cloudy trophies is?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Jo. She was starting to feel rather foolish. She began to suspect that unravelling the riddle might be a lengthy process.

'She is Melancholy, and Keats is saying what not to do when afflicted with sadness. This is the beginning of the poem.'

*No, no, go not to Lethe,  
neither twist Wolf's-bane,  
tight-rooted,  
for its poisonous wine...*

Jo jumped at the mention of Lethe.

'As you know, Lethe was the Greek goddess of the river of oblivion. Whatever Burnley was trying to tell you, it undoubtedly has something to do with your aunt and her power to bestow oblivion.'

Matthew lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes. 'I'm going to sleep on it,' he said, and Jo took that as her cue to leave. She was quietly tip-toeing out of the room when her scarred hand began to itch unbearably. Her blood had once mingled with Lethe's. The itching was a sure sign that her aunt was near.

There was a frosted glass security door at the far end of the corridor and through it Jo could make out the distinctive shape of Lethe. Jo scratched at her hand as the itching turned sharp and prickly, making her wince. She screwed up her eyes and that's when she realised. Smokey was there, watching Lethe.

In her mind's eye, Jo could see Smokey's view of Lethe and Bridget, engrossed in conversation directly before him. Jo turned and looked along the corridor,

she could make out Lethe and Bridget through the glass, but they were quite clearly the only ones there.

Smokey had always been good at blending into the background but since his torturous experience of the mirror maze, his special ability had magnified a thousand fold. With a gasp, Jo realised that he was now able to turn himself completely invisible!

He was concentrating on the security pad as Lethe quickly typed in a code. How long had he been spying on her? Jo was surprised by the password her aunt had entered but there was no time to think about that now.

Reacting quickly, Jo leapt toward the facing door. There was a keypad next to it. Jo seized the moment and typed in Lethe's code. A screen with an image of a handprint lit up. Jo's scar was positively throbbing now and she scratched at it even harder.

Jo watched as Smokey watched Lethe place her hand on the identical screen. Jo was scrubbing furiously at her own hand now, to the point where she had drawn blood. A moment later she saw Lethe withdraw her hand as a single drop of blood ran down her elegant finger. With a start, Jo realised that she may have a chance after all.

Jo closed her eyes, put her hand against the screen and hoped. Both doors unlocked at once. Jo darted into room 317 and shut the door behind her, scant seconds before Lethe, Bridget and Smokey entered the corridor. To her horror, they stopped directly outside the door.

Hardly daring to breathe, Jo could do nothing other than listen.

'I have checked the security tapes from the night in question,' said Lethe, 'and it comes as no surprise that they are mysteriously blank. Everyone and everything connected with Lucy and her baby would appear to have vanished from the face of the earth.'

'What did Mr. Stigmurus say about it all?'

'He reminded me that he was responsible for shooting the girl, and had believed her to be dead. When he found out she was still alive, although in a coma, he felt he had a chance for atonement and a sacred duty to ensure she had proper medical care. He

says he knows nothing of any baby. I believed him right up to that point.'

'Why would he lie to you?' asked Bridget. 'You have always worked so well together.'

'Indeed. His influence and reputation worldwide is such that he is the perfect figurehead. He attracts investors and associates from the highest echelons of society. He is indispensable. Our relationship has indeed, been most advantageous, but it is not without its tensions. I believe the time has come for him to leave the overall administration of the organisation to me. This would enable him to concentrate on the ethos of the Glory Foundation and examine the wider philosophical implications of philanthropy. He disagrees. A rift has opened between us.'

Bridget sighed. 'Well, he is not getting any younger... maybe it is time he took a back seat.'

Lethe permitted herself a small smile. 'He is convinced he can keep going for ever, Bridget. Honestly! Did you ever hear anything so ridiculous?' Bridget laughed. Delighted with her private joke, Lethe continued. 'He truly believes in the prophecy and seeks for the Child of Glory so he can protect and guide it. Frankly, I doubt the existence of such a child but I do believe in the power of the prophecy and would seek to harness it. They are quite different perspectives.'

Bridget was shocked. 'But I saw the Child!' she gasped. 'You were there! How can you not believe?'

'I lack your faith, Bridget. It is hard for a scientist to believe in miracles.'

'That is so sad. I will pray for you, Madame.' A thought came to Bridget. 'So does Mr. Titus think Lucy's baby is the Child of Glory?'

'I believe that is the most likely explanation although I am at a loss to understand his unwillingness to consult me. Well, for the time being let him think his silly little secret is safe. I have other fish to fry. Please wait here, Bridget.' So saying, she opened the door to Matthew's room and stepped inside.





Jo cursed inwardly as Bridget stood in the corridor blocking her way out. Under other circumstances she would have easily distracted Bridget by feigning interest in the Glory Foundation, but now it would be obvious she had overheard what had been said. Jo was certain it was better for her if her aunt was unaware she knew about Lucy's baby.

She had seen Titus shoot Lucy at close range. It never occurred to her that the hard-bitten street girl had survived, let alone had a baby! She had a sudden flash of memory from her stay in America. Hawk had overheard Titus talking to Mirabel. *The doctors say she is comfortable, but her time is approaching.* At the time they thought it was about someone old and near to death, now she realised it was more likely about Lucy and her pregnancy.

With the doorway blocked, Jo looked for another way out. There was nothing in the room other than normal hospital furniture and a large built-in wardrobe. Hearing footsteps and male voices outside, she began to panic. To her horror, the footsteps drew nearer then stopped outside the room she was in. She darted inside the wardrobe and flattened herself behind some overalls hanging there. She held her breath as two men in violet uniforms came into the room then opened the wardrobe door.



'My team tell me you are making a remarkable recovery, Old Goat.'

Matthew kept his eyes closed. 'I believe I have you to thank,' he said drily. 'You are, and always have been, a woman of prodigious talent. Talent which you have, in the main, mis-used wantonly.'

'Alas, my wanton days are over,' said Lethe, wilfully twisting Matthew's meaning. 'We are all reformed characters now. Penitence is quite the thing. But enough banter. Your progress is excellent. A casual observer would consider the operation a success.'

'No-one in their right mind would call you a casual observer, Lethe,' said Matthew wryly. 'What is your point?'

'I am wondering about the less obvious manifestations of health in a man of your talents. For example, I have emped you twice since I entered the room, and you have not replied.'

Matthew was suddenly alert. Nevertheless, his reply sounded lazily amused. 'I am an old man, Lethe. Many of my abilities are less reliable than they were. Emping between us was never as successful as it is between your sister and me. It is, after all, one of your lesser talents.' He paused and appeared to concentrate. 'I just emped you, but can only presume my message did not reach you. Had it done so, your beautiful eyes would be flashing with anger.'

'You are bluffing, Old Goat.'

'Perhaps. I certainly believe you are. Shall we cut to the chase? As I understand it, the artificial heart now so efficiently keeping me alive, is programmed and controlled by you.'

'Admirably concise. Yes. Under ideal conditions, it will keep you ticking over for many more years to come.'

'And under less ideal conditions it could be switched off and that would be that.'

'Now who would dream of doing such a thing?'

'I can think of one,' said Matthew. He looked directly at Lethe.

'I suppose that is one advantage of the programme,' agreed Lethe amiably. 'Participants will simply cease to be if they become problematic to me. But that is just a minor benefit. We need not concern ourselves with that.' She paused. Her voice became contemplative. 'Believe it or not, Old Goat, I have no wish to snuff out your life. I have such fond memories of you. And I hear you and Miss Montgomery are planning to marry! How quaint. And how sad, after all this time, if that were prevented.' She let her words sink in before continuing. 'Again, I have no desire to ruin your plans. You may choose to disbelieve me, but

I assure you I had no grand plan to recruit you into Heartsease. After all, if some other organ had failed, we would not be having this conversation. But Fate delivered you to me, and it would be churlish to look Fate's gift horse in the mouth.'

'Perhaps I will turn out to be a Trojan horse,' warned Matthew.

'Perhaps. But there are so many ways in which you could be of value to me and my work. You have resisted me for so long, Old Goat. Now I have a weapon against your resistance. I have leverage.'

Matthew sighed. 'Leverage. I see. You want to use the threat of shutting down my heart to force me to help you with your plans.'

'Force is such an ugly word. Think of it as a working partnership.'

He sighed again. 'So what is it you want from me?'

'First, I want you to heal my scars. Just the visible ones for now.' So saying, Lethe removed her mask.

Matthew's old eyes filled with tears. He remembered how, years ago, Lethe had come to him and danced. She was vivid and gorgeous. Her copper hair shone with youth and health; her green eyes flashed with promises of secrets and mischief. Her shining skin smelt of salt and honey.

And now he could scarcely bear to look at her.



'It's about time they fitted a light in here,' grumbled the older of the two men as they stepped into the wardrobe. Jo did her best to be silent and invisible. 'Gives me the creeps.'

'No light; no buttons; no security pads,' said the other man. Transfixed with horror Jo saw a hand coming towards her, fumbling in the gloom. She held her breath and pressed herself flat against the back of the wardrobe. 'If you want somewhere to stay secret, don't draw attention to it! If anyone ever comes into this room, they won't see anything unusual. Just a wardrobe.' The hand grasped one of the coat hooks

and twisted it. 'Won't be long now. Off we go to Narnia.'

To Jo's horror it felt as if the floor just dropped away. She bit her lip to stop from crying out, realising that the wardrobe was really a lift. And they were travelling downwards very fast, hurtling deep beneath the Glory Heights Hospital.



'You only needed to ask,' said Matthew. 'It was not necessary to use blackmail. I will do this willingly, if I have the power.'

Lethe said nothing. Her gaze was steady; her expression unfathomable. Matthew looked deep into her lovely eyes, then gasped as comprehension slowly dawned. 'But of course. This is just the start, isn't it? There will be other demands.'

'Yes,' she said. 'There will be other demands. And those you will not be so willing to meet. But that is the price of your life.'

'If I choose to pay. For now, let us restore the beauty you value so highly.'

'I am not alone in that. As you well know.'

'Indeed. To my everlasting cost. No wonder we men fear beautiful women. We know we might lose ourselves. Faced with that power, we are weak. And I am weak now, for other reasons. What if I fail?'

'Later, Old Goat. Shall we begin?'



As quickly as it had begun, the descent was over. The lift came to a halt and the door opened onto a large, dark cavern hewn from blue-grey clay, with several tunnels leading away into the darkness. Rough-hewn pillars like tree trunks supported the roof and marked the tunnel entrances. Jo watched as the two men climbed into a small motorised cart and drove off. As soon as they disappeared from view, she pulled on a set of the violet overalls hanging in the lift, and entered the cavern.

For some reason she had yet to understand, Jo's powers were magnified when she was underground. She felt vividly alive. All her senses were heightened and she was particularly aware of distant sounds. Confident she would hear anyone approaching long before they realised she was there, she set off to explore the tunnel in the direction the men had taken.

Low wattage lamps were dotted at long intervals along the walls, making small pools of murky light in the darkness. Her eyes adjusted remarkably well to the gloom. Vivid memories came back to her of being a fugitive, hiding from her aunt and Titus in the maze of disused tunnels and underground stations beneath London. She remembered Zebo, Lucy, Wheezy and the other Ferals – street kids with nowhere else to go. Crazy Em had saved Jo from Lucy's vicious jealousy only to be murderously attacked in her turn. Close to death, Em was rescued by Zebo and slowly nursed back to life by Reg. As her health returned, so did her memory.

Gradually Crazy Em remembered that her real name was Mary Montgomery. Her first love, Matthew Jameson, had gone to war and fallen in love with someone else. When his family were killed in a terrible accident, Mary was there to comfort him. As well as being his friend she was his colleague at the university where Jo's parents had first met. When Mary fell foul of Lethe, the younger woman used her considerable powers to ensure that Mary fell into professional and personal oblivion. For many years Mary was lost to Matthew, and eventually, to herself.

Jo shook off the memories of the past and concentrated on exploring her surroundings. She was fascinated to see fossils in the clay. Among the selection of bones belonging to fish, birds and small mammals she spotted a starfish.

As she stopped to examine the starfish Jo noticed a small hole in the wall where time had eroded the stone. On a whim she peered in and saw something she would never have imagined or expected.

Jo was looking into a dimly lit chamber lined entirely with human bones. Rows of skulls alternated with long thigh and rib bones, making a grotesque frame for a huge central relief panel, which was in turn made from clusters of vertebrae and other smaller hand and finger bones. If the idea wasn't macabre enough, the panel depicted a crippled man in a loincloth with two dogs licking his hands.

Horrified yet mystified, Jo went further along the tunnel, looking for a way in to the bone room. What she found instead was sickening.



Matthew was exhausted. 'My power is depleted by the surgery. Perhaps when I am fully recovered...'

Lethe concealed her disappointment well. 'Perhaps. In the meanwhile, there is an alternative. I have a blood bond with my niece. She has the power to heal me, but she refuses. You must make her co-operate.'

Matthew started to protest, but Lethe cut him short. 'Just do it,' she snapped, and swept out of the room.

Matthew slumped back on his pillows. He and Mary had been through so much, and now they had a chance to be together. He would not let her down, but the thought of coercing Jo was repulsive to him. He had to find another way.

On his bedside table lay Jo's copy of the *Scorpion Grass* riddle. Listlessly he picked it up and tried to make sense of the conundrum.



Jo fled. Back down the tunnel and into the lift. As she closed the door it rose automatically. She leaned against the side, her heart racing. She could barely breathe. As soon as she could she slipped off the overalls and hung them back up. The lift stopped, and a spyhole showed her an empty room. With a gasp of relief she composed herself and slipped across the corridor to tell Matthew what she had seen.

## Chapter Eight – The Proposal

The flight to Singapore had been pleasant enough and the sleek blue car was luxuriously comfortable. As she sped through the dark and crowded rain-lashed streets of the Geylang red light district, Mirabel sat back and ran through her plan again.

She hoped Titus was right in his assessment of Sebastian's loyalty. She looked at the back of his head with distaste.

*Moon-faced little creep, she thought. Sneaking into a person's dreams without as much as a by your leave. Wouldn't do for him to go blabbing to Her Ladyship. Might be easier all round if he meets with an unfortunate accident.*

Sebastian interrupted her reverie. 'This is the address, Madame. Number seven.' His words were innocuous enough, but Mirabel thought she detected an insolent note. She assumed an autocratic tone and was gratified to see Sebastian flush angrily.

'Excellent. Now be a good boy, put the sign on, and let them know the taxi has arrived. Pull your cap down and your collar up. Don't want her recognising you.'

'Unlikely,' said Sebastian. 'Seeing as how we've never met.' There was a supercilious edge to his words.

Mirabel was needled. 'I know that, dummy. I meant later, when this is all over. Chop chop.'

She watched as Sebastian got out, knocked at the door with the large red seven and spoke into an intercom.

Two women, obviously sisters, appeared in the doorway; one was carrying several suitcases. The younger woman was very thin and unwell. She was deeply distressed. In her arms she carried a tiny baby, well wrapped up against the cold in a pink blanket with little red hearts on. She repeatedly kissed the baby's head. The sisters spoke animatedly and embraced warmly. Sebastian loaded the luggage and returned to his seat. The women were still talking.

'Get them to hurry up,' said Mirabel irritably. 'Tell her she'll miss her flight.' She fiddled anxiously with the elaborate gold ring she was wearing. A blood-red ruby shaped like a tear drop fitted with a matching emerald to make the shape of a heart.

Sebastian sounded his horn and revved the engine. 'I didn't say disturb the whole flamin' neighbourhood,' scowled Mirabel. She pulled shut the smoked glass divider between driver and passengers and settled back on the luxurious leather upholstery, disappearing into the shadows.

The sisters separated reluctantly, and the younger woman tenderly passed the baby over to her sister who climbed into the back of the car. The doors locked and they sped away. As they left a yellow top taxi drew up outside number seven, but he was too late. His passenger had just left.

From the shadows of the back of the blue car Mirabel spoke. 'Hello, Brenda. Fancy seeing you.'

Matthew looked up from the notes he had made. The encyclopaedia lay open on the bed. 'I might have some answers for you,' he began, then he broke off when he saw Jo's face. 'Whatever's the matter, Jo?'

She started to tell him about the underground tunnel, describing the room full of bones.

'An ossuary,' he breathed.

'A what?'

'An ossuary. A final resting place for bones. There is a famous one in a gothic church in Sedlec, in the Czech republic. For centuries people believed it to be a sacred site and their bones were stored there. Then in 1870, a wood carver called Frantisek Rint was left as the guardian of the place and he turned the bones into decorations. There is even a chandelier...'

Jo shivered. 'Gruesome,' she said.

'Maybe,' said Matthew, 'but the facts of life are one thing; the facts of death another. How should we dispose of what remains when our soul, if indeed such a thing exists, departs the shell we call our body?'



Jo decided to skip the subject of souls. And the rituals of death. 'There was a bone picture in the room I saw,' she said. 'It was a man and two dogs, but that's not what I have to tell you!'

'Hang on a moment,' said Matthew as he selected one of the many Get Well cards he had been sent. 'Was it something like that?'

Jo stared in amazement. She saw a man in a loin cloth, leaning on a stick. A halo framed his face. The two dogs at his side were, she saw clearly now, licking the man's wounds. 'Exactly like that,' she said.

'From a devout Catholic friend of mine,' said Matthew. 'That is Saint Lazarus. Not exactly my idea of a Get Well card. But it does coincide nicely with the last verse of the riddle.'

*Beneath all the trappings of power and glory  
Lie the Lazar bones, deep in the clay.  
An invisible path for invisible souls,  
Go beyond heartsease to find the way.*

'*Beneath all the trappings of power and glory* certainly sounds like the Glory Foundation to me. It looks to me like you've found it! So where else does the tunnel lead?'

'That's what I've been trying to tell you! A really horrible laboratory.' Jo shivered at the memory. 'After I saw the – what did you call it?'

'Ossuary. From the Latin.'

'Right. After the ossuary I followed the tunnel to the end. There was a locked door with a sign saying only authorised personnel could enter, but on either side were huge windows. When I looked inside everything was all misty. A strange light was shining on rows and rows of ...' Jo faltered at the memory, then mustered her courage to continue.

'Rows and rows of dead bodies. Men, women and children. All naked. Just hanging there. It reminded me of a meat locker. Some of the bodies were complete, but most had bits missing.' Jo shuddered at the memory.

'There was an office area with a big cabinet with two drawers. One said *Hearts* and the other *Heartsease*. Then I noticed that the walls were lined with dozens of glass drawers. I looked closer and they were all full of eyes and tongues and pieces of dead bodies! I felt sick and ran.'

Jo stopped, and waited for Matthew's reaction. He was silent for a long time, then said just one word. 'Fascinating.'

That was not what Jo had expected. 'It was gruesome!' she said indignantly. 'I keep thinking I should tell the police, but Aunt Lethe and Titus have so many informers in the police force, I wouldn't know who to trust.'

Matthew laughed. 'And why would you do that?'

Jo wondered if her friend was going mad. 'They ought to investigate!' she shouted. Matthew looked quizzical and rather amused. His attitude infuriated and emboldened Jo. 'Do you think Lethe and Titus should just get away with murder?' she demanded angrily.

Matthew looked contrite. 'Sorry, Jo. I've been teasing you. God knows Lethe and Titus have many, many deaths to answer for, but not, I think, the corpses you saw. Thousands of people dedicate their bodies for medical research after their death. Glory Heights is renowned worldwide for having perfected the storage of bodies and body parts for a range of procedures that are nothing short of miraculous. There are people alive and well now thanks to the generosity of the organ donors and the skill and dedication of the staff here. And hard as it is to swallow, that tribute includes your aunt.'

Jo thought for a while, then responded passionately. 'Everything Aunt Lethe ever does looks amazing on the surface. Like her. Or like she was. But underneath it's always darkness, death and destruction.'

'Is it so hard to give her some credit, Jo? I mentioned the facts of death. Once life has departed, what should we do with the bodies left behind? Bury them? Submerge them? Burn them? Leave them for

the vultures to pick clean? Or truly value them, harvest them and bring joy from sadness?’

Jo was lost for words.



Brenda looked around her in total bewilderment. The speaker sounded exactly like Mirabel! She peered into the shadows and as her eyes adjusted to the gloom she saw the outline of a familiar bouffant wig. Mirabel loomed forwards from out of the shadows, revealing her garish peacock blue eye shadow and blood red Cupid’s bow of a mouth.

‘What the hell is going on?’ demanded Brenda. ‘What are you doing here?’ She looked out of the window. ‘Hey! This isn’t the way to the airport.’ She rattled the doors and banged on the sliding window behind the driver. He took no notice.

‘Don’t shout. You’ll wake the baby. What’s she called, anyway?’

‘Josie.’ Brenda answered automatically before she could stop herself.

‘Well, Brenda, it’s very good of you to offer to take Josie in while your gormless sister sorts herself out. However, there’s been a slight change of plan,’ answered Mirabel. ‘So settle down, because you ain’t getting out of this car – not at this speed. We’ve got a good long drive to have a chat in. Might as well relax and enjoy the ride.’ She pressed a button and a sliding door opened to reveal a walnut cocktail cabinet. ‘Fancy a tippie?’ She poured herself a hefty slug of gin.

Brenda managed to look both bewildered and furious at the same time. ‘Make mine a double,’ she demanded, ‘then tell me what witch’s brew you are cooking up.’

‘That’s the ticket,’ said Mirabel, and she poured Brenda’s drink. As she did so, a droplet of green liquid fell from beneath the emerald on her ring into the glass.

She raised her glass. ‘Your very good health.’ With a look of disdain Brenda downed her drink in one slug. Mirabel smiled to herself.

'I've got a little proposition for you, Brenda. A nice little job. Just up your street.'

'I'm not going to help you! What do you take me for? An assassin? A mercenary?'

'You haven't heard my proposition yet. You will agree. Because in return for your help that hooker sister of yours will meet a mysterious benefactor and get a fresh start a world away from the evil little pimp what runs her life at the moment. She'll get help to come off the drugs. She'll have the best medical care there is and she'll finally get to go to art college like she should have done before she went off the rails. Then you can stop worrying about her and concentrate on the baby and your old man. And if we can do anything to help him, then we'll throw that in as a bonus.'

Brenda's mouth fell open in astonishment. 'How do you know all that?' she asked quietly. Mirabel gave her a wink.

Brenda sat there in shocked silence before speaking again. When she did, her voice was soft and afraid. 'Why me? In case you haven't noticed, we are not on the same side.'

'And that makes you perfect for the job. I want someone I can trust implicitly. Someone who hates the Glory Foundation, even if it is stumping up the readies to sort out her naughty little sister. Now. You concentrate on what I'm saying.' Mirabel's voice had taken on an hypnotic quality. 'Remember what I'm telling you.'

Brenda's head was beginning to swim. She struggled to concentrate but she was determined to make her point.

'You're right about one thing, Mirabel. You are part of an organisation I despise, run by people I hate. Lethe Lacuna and Titus Stigmurus are wicked, dangerous tyrants hiding behind a thin veneer of religion. I'll never do their dirty work.'

'Listen to me, Brenda. This ain't nothing to do with Lethe and Titus. They must never, ever know of our arrangement. This is just you and me.'

Brenda was drowsy now, but still resisting. 'Hardly reassuring.'

Mirabel laughed drily. 'That's the spirit. Now listen. I've told you what's on offer. Your sister gets a fresh start; your old man gets help and in return you just have to take care of summat for me. All expenses paid.'

Even as the drug took hold of her, opening her mind to be fully receptive to Mirabel's proposal, Brenda struggled to stay alert. 'Take care of? Does that mean kill?'

'No killing. No hurting. No rough stuff, I promise you. Just looking after. 'Course, if you stops doing the looking after then your little sister will be back on the streets quicker 'n you can blink. And Gawd help your old man. But it ain't going to come to that, 'cos you're going to say yes, and you won't never tell a living soul about our arrangement. That's right, ain't it, Brenda?'

Brenda gave a deep breath, then exhaled the single word, 'Yes,' before falling fast asleep.

Mirabel worked quickly. She peered into the depths of her knitting bag. 'Sorry about the laudanum, my poppet,' she whispered into the shadows, 'but we couldn't risk you crying out.' Then she looked at Brenda's niece. 'Scrawny little scrap, ain't you,' she said dispassionately. 'Just a little bag of bones. Ah well. Better take care of you, I suppose.'

She laid Josie on the floor of the car, then reached into the knitting bag, checking all the time that Sebastian could not see what she was doing. Tenderly she lifted out her great-granddaughter, and laid her next to Josie.

Mirabel carefully undressed both babies, then re-dressed them in each other's clothes, She rummaged under the seat for a new, nondescript sports bag. She checked inside – it was lined with bundle upon bundle of banknotes. She carefully rested Brenda's little niece inside. Shortly afterwards she knocked on the window to the driver. 'Just pull over to the left.'

A high brick wall ran alongside the road. Mirabel clambered out of the car with the sports bag and stood

in front of a stone archway leading to a porch. *The Little Sisters of Saint Ivo* was carved into the stone, with a modern brass plaque underneath bearing the VergissMeinNicht logo. Facing her was an ancient oak studded door. A bell rope hung down at the side. Mirabel placed the sports bag in front of the door, then heaved on the bell rope. With a surprising turn of speed she was back in the car before the bell stopped ringing.

'Next stop, the airfield, driver.' She leaned back in her seat, confident that she had acted effectively and more or less honourably, as Titus had demanded. *Wonder if there's ever been a Saint Mirabel,* she thought.

♡  
'Do you know anything about Saint Lazarus, Jo?'

Conversations with Matthew and Mary always left Jo feeling woefully ignorant, something she disliked intently. She gave it her best shot. 'The patron saint of dogs?' she hazarded.

'A good guess, and perfectly logical, but alas, not correct.' He leafed through the encyclopaedia. 'Aha! The patron saint of dogs is, in fact, Saint Roch. Good heavens. According to this, he is the patron saint of bachelors, diseased cattle, falsely accused people, invalids, Istanbul, surgeons, tile-makers, gravediggers, second-hand dealers, pilgrims and apothecaries... and dogs. A thoroughly motley crew.' He grew silent then, seemingly lost in thought.

'Saint Lazarus?' prompted Jo.

'Ah yes. Possibly the first Bishop of Marseilles. Or not. There is, of course, the story of the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus, in the Gospel of Luke. Not to be confused with Lazarus of Bethany, believed to have been raised by Jesus from the dead. Whatever the truth of it, in the twelfth century the Knights of the Order of Saint Lazarus cared for those suffering from leprosy, now called Hansen's disease. Another time I must tell you how they tried to control the condition all those years ago.'

Jo remembered the plaque in the chapel. It had given a detailed history of the Glory Heights site, right back to the Middle Ages. 'This place was built on the site of an old leper hospital,' she recollected.

At that moment, a very determined nurse arrived in the doorway. 'You are supposed to be resting,' she said firmly to Matthew. 'Off you go, young lady. Visiting ended a long time ago. You can come back tomorrow.'

Jo felt it best not to argue. She said her goodbyes and was out in the corridor when Matthew called her back. 'We are struggling with weighty issues, Jo. Make sure you enjoy yourself as well as worrying about darkness, death and destruction. Life has its lighter side.' He indicated the riddle. 'This, for example, is great fun. I've got some homework for you. Check out Doctor Johann Georg Faust.'

'Does he work here?' asked Jo, still struggling with the ideas swirling round her head. Matthew burst out laughing. He suddenly looked a whole lot better.

The sleek blue car sped through the night. Mirabel looked out of the window as the residential area gave way to a large industrial park. Before long Sebastian punched in a security code and drove through ornate wrought iron gates bearing the VergissMeinNicht emblem, then onto a private airfield where a fleet of forget-me-not blue light aircraft was waiting.

Mirabel looked at Sebastian. 'Right. Get Brenda on to the plane, then come back for her luggage. She's a bit the worse for wear. I'll bring the baby. You just make sure we gets to London as fast as you can. If we don't get there before her proper plane gets in, you won't be getting that big fat bonus Mr. Titus promised you, and more important, you'll have to answer to me.'

'Have we got clearance to land in London?' asked Sebastian.

'No, I thought we'd just jump out the bleedin' plane,' said Mirabel sarcastically. 'Course we've got clearance. They've been told it's top secret GLORY business. Nurse Carson will be waiting to take Brenda

and the baby and her bags to the main hall. Then you make sure you meet me in the VIP lounge for a little celebratory tippie.'

She wrapped Bella in the pink blanket with red hearts and held her tight. She watched as Sebastian hauled an unconscious Brenda onto the plane. She was willing herself not to cry. 'I've done the best I can, Bella,' she whispered. 'You'll be safe with Brenda. I'll keep an eye on you and I'll always love you. I wish I could keep you with me for always, but it's better this way.'

With a heavy heart she walked across the tarmac and boarded the plane.



'You're late,' said Ali. 'Visiting time was over ages ago. Supper's cold.' She sounded aggrieved.

Jo felt contrite. 'Sorry, Mum. Matthew and I were trying to work something out and we got carried away.'

'Can I help?' Immediately Ali's crossness dissipated. She had a sunny disposition and could not stay angry with Jo for long.

'Have you ever heard of a Doctor Faustus at the hospital?'

Ali shook her head. 'There's a Doctor Faustus,' she said. 'But he's a character in a play. I've still got my college copy somewhere. Might be a connection.'

A few moments later she was back, clutching a dog-eared copy of the play. Several loose pages fell out as she opened it. '*The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe,' she read.

Jo picked up the fallen pages and handed them over. 'Looks like your writing,' she said. She couldn't help noticing the name *Alithea Quinn* written over and over again, in different styles of writing, embellished with hearts and flowers.

Ali blushed. 'It's my notes on the book,' she said, contriving to fold the pages and conceal the doodles. She scanned the introduction to her notes. 'Aha! It says here the play might be based on the life of Doctor



Johann Georg Faust; alchemist, astrologer and magician around 1600.'

Realisation hit Jo. 'Oh! That's why Matthew laughed when I asked if Doctor Faust worked at the hospital. At least I managed to cheer him up. So what happens in the play?'

'As I recall, Faustus is a brilliant scholar. He sells his soul to the Devil in return for twenty-four years of absolute power. He gets everything he asks for, including a fling with Helen of Troy. Then at the end, he wants to repent, but it's too late. The Devil comes to claim him. I had to learn his final speech for one of my assignments. It was incredibly moving and tragic. I can still remember part of it.' She flicked through the pages to the end of the play. 'Here it is.'

*The stars move still,  
Time runs, the Clocke will strike,  
The devill will come,  
and Faustus must be damn'd.  
O I'll leape up to my God:  
who puls me downe?  
See see where Christs blood  
streames in the firmament,  
One drop would save my soule,  
halfe a drop, ah my Christ.  
Rend not my heart,  
for naming of my Christ,  
Yet will I call on him:  
O spare me Lucifer.*

There was a long silence. 'Wow,' said Jo eventually. 'A deal with the Devil. Wow. Wasn't there a musician who sold his soul as well?'

'More than one, or so the legends go. I remember hearing about Robert Johnson, the great blues player. He is supposed to have met Satan at the crossroads at midnight, and sold his soul in exchange for fortune and fame as a musician.' She looked at Jo, who was lost in thought. 'So what's all this about?'

'It's a riddle, in Everard Burnley's latest book. I thought Matthew would enjoy figuring it out.' Jo didn't mention how the author had drawn her attention to the chapter, or her conviction that he wanted her to unravel a mystery. Or the descent to the tunnels beneath the hospital, and all she had seen. Her parents had made it clear she was not to have any more dangerous adventures. She kissed her mother goodnight and headed for bed where she read *Scorpion Grass* until the small hours of the morning.



Mirabel tapped her foot impatiently as she waited in a quiet corner of the VIP lounge. She fiddled with the gold ring she was wearing, admiring the blood-red ruby and jungle-green emerald. She knocked back the two glasses of champagne the obsequious waiter had poured, and ordered some more. At last Sebastian appeared. Only the most observant watcher would have seen her pass her hand over his glass and the single red droplet fall silently from the ring into the golden bubbles.

'I'll have my money,' he said flatly.

'Of course you will.' Mirabel handed him a bulky envelope. 'Now sit here and relax.' She handed him the champagne flute. 'Down the hatch,' she said and watched as he gulped down his drink, anxious to get away.

The poison worked swiftly, but Mirabel took her time before calling for help. She wanted to be sure that Sebastian would be past saving.

Sebastian reached up and tugged at his collar, his mouth a ghastly rictus.

'Sorry, my poppet,' said Mirabel softly, 'but you're paralysed.'

Sebastian's eyes bulged as they stared at her. With a sharp convulsion his limbs locked. He sat rigid in his seat.

'It won't take long.' She smiled. 'You may be a nasty piece of work but I ain't one to make you suffer.'

He gurgled, his enormous head swelling larger than ever.

'Not that I expect you to appreciate that,' added Mirabel, sadly.

Summoning all the force of will he had left, Sebastian emped. As his twisted life ebbed away, his dying words echoed in Mirabel's mind.

***Sweet dreams.***

Unfazed, Mirabel chuckled to herself. 'I ain't dreamed in donkey's years.'

She was all concern as the paramedics took Sebastian away. 'Must be a heart attack,' one of them said to her, sympathetically, and she tried to squeeze out a tear.

After the fuss had died down there was a quiet moment when Sebastian's glass somehow ended up in Mirabel's knitting bag. As indeed did the bulky envelope. 'Just a few loose ends,' she said to herself, and with that she quietly slipped away.

Matthew was out of bed, sitting in a comfortable armchair by the window. His reference book was bristling with strips of torn paper where he had marked several pages. He worked late into the night.

## Chapter Nine – One for Sorrow

'Good morning, Matthew! It's great to see you out of bed!' Outside the pale wintry sun shone in a grey sky.

Matthew smiled at Jo. 'Good morning, Jo.' Then he recited the second verse of the riddle.

*A tidings of magpies, seven in all,  
A city for Bertie, where peacocks roam.  
Pipe down soldier! Tokio's listening.  
The bookbinder's saint is right at home.*

'I never knew a group of magpies was called a tidings,' he said. 'One for sorrow, two for joy...'

Jo carried on the old saying. 'Three for a girl, four for a boy.'

'Five for silver...'

'Six for gold...'

They chorused the next line together. 'Seven for a secret not to be told!'

'And that's how I came to thinking about secret cities,' mused Matthew.

'How can a city be a secret?' wondered Jo.

'Stalin could answer that question better than me, Jo. There were dozens of secret cities in Russia, built for weapons research and military intelligence. In the First World War, Britain built a war factory in Scotland and it never officially existed! The Americans were at it as well. They had secret cities in Washington, New Mexico and Tennessee. But the Russians were the masters of secrecy.'

Jo absorbed this astonishing information. 'Bertie doesn't sound very Russian,' she observed.

Matthew was positively gleeful. 'Good thinking. So what does the name mean to you?'

Jo realised he already knew the answer to this part of the riddle, but was enjoying the game. She humoured him. 'Um, Bertie Wooster?'

Matthew shook his head. Jo tried again. 'Wasn't there a king nicknamed Bertie?'

'Indeed there was – King Edward the Seventh was known as Bertie. But that's not the answer. I can see I'll have to tell you!' And at that he burst into song, adopting an atrocious cockney accent.

*I'm Burlington Bertie; I rise at ten thirty  
and saunter along like a toff  
I walk down the Strand with my gloves on my hand  
Then I walk down again with them off.*

Jo looked utterly baffled. 'Never heard of him,' she said at last.

Matthew sighed. 'Ah well. Too young. It was a very popular song in its time. Anyway the key word is Burlington. It's a secret city in Wiltshire.'

'I've never heard of a secret city in Wiltshire,' objected Jo.

'That's because it's secret,' smiled Matthew, delighted she had fallen into his trap. 'It's an enormous underground complex beneath Corsham.'

'I've been to Corsham! It's very pretty – and, oh, there are peacocks walking around the streets!'

'Exactly. Well, it started out as a war factory in a former Bath stone quarry. When World War Two ended, it was designated as an emergency war headquarters, and then it was turned into the underground bunker for the Government if nuclear war broke out. There was a medical centre, a dentist, a laundry and a bakery. And a small library. It was built to house over four thousand key people. Over the years it has had all sorts of names: Stockwell, Subterfuge, Turnstile as well as Burlington.'

'If it's so secret, how come you know all this?'

'I worked there for a while during the war. But even if I hadn't, there have always been rumours about the place. I heard that one of the builders was furious that he and his mates were building a shelter they would be forbidden to use because they weren't considered important. He told his daughter about it and she told the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.'

'CND. Mum and Dad used to go on marches with them when they were young. So not quite so secret, then. How about the rest of the verse?'

'*Pipe Down, Soldier* was a wartime poster, meaning keep quiet and don't risk giving the enemy valuable information – but I have no idea who the bookbinder's saint is. I think it's just another pointer to Burlington or Corsham, but I will check.'

'Even if we solve the riddle,' said Jo pensively, 'we still might not know what it all means.'

Matthew looked at her quizzically. 'Go on.'

'Well, so far we've worked out some places – this hospital; Burlington; Mag Mell – wherever that is – and something about Lethe. Oh, and a contract with the Devil.'

'Well done,' beamed Matthew. 'You picked up the reference to Faustus. Good girl.'

Jo basked in his approval for a moment, then honesty compelled her to say, 'Mum helped me.'

'See if she knows who the bookbinder's saint is. She'll enjoy helping. You're right about the meaning being elusive. I'm pretty sure I know where the other two locations are, but that will have to wait until later. I'm expecting a visit from my bride-to-be, and I need to make myself presentable.'

'She'll love you just the way you are,' teased Jo. 'Give her my love. I'll pop in and see if Smokey is awake.'

She was at the door before Mathew spoke. 'Jo, have you seen your aunt lately?'

'No.'

'I hear she is terribly scarred.'

'Yes.'

'I have been asking myself, if I could help her, would I?'

'What did you decide?'

'I'm still thinking.'

'Me too.'



'Brenda?' Reg shook her anxiously. 'Wake up! I've been looking for you everywhere!'

Brenda opened her eyes. The room was spinning. The bright light was unbearable. 'Where am I?' she groaned.

'London. Sorry I'm late – the traffic was terrible. I got stuck behind an ambulance – apparently they found some bloke in the VIP lounge – one of the Glory pilots. Had a heart attack or something. Anyway, I think he's snuffed it, so everyone's running around like headless chickens. Did you have a good flight?'

'I dunno – I think so. My head hurts.' So saying, Brenda closed her eyes and rested her head on the table.

Reg looked at her with alarm. 'Bren – are you drunk?'

Brenda spoke without raising her head. 'Never touched a drop.' She struggled to remember. 'Oh. Perhaps just one... with Mirabel...'

'You had a drink with Mirabel?' Reg was astonished. 'Was she on the plane?'

'Can't remember.' Brenda sat up. 'Where's the baby?' She was suddenly stone cold sober.

Reg smiled. 'Right here.'

Brenda looked at Reg until she could focus properly. In his arms was a bundle in a pink blanket with little red hearts. As he looked at the little girl he smiled and Brenda felt her heart contract. 'Oh, Reg,' she whispered.

Reg couldn't meet her eyes. 'She's a bit hot in this,' he said, making his voice sound business like. He loosened the blanket. 'That's better.' The baby opened her eyes and gurgled.

Brenda could not believe her eyes. She reached for the baby and stared and stared. Panic started to rise in her breast. 'It's not her,' she said finally. 'It's not her. It's the wrong baby.'

Reg looked alarmed. 'Bren – are you crazy? Of course it's not the wrong baby!'

Brenda rummaged in her handbag. She thrust a dark blue passport under Reg's nose. 'Look! Open it!'

Read what it says. Fair hair, brown eyes. This baby's got blue eyes.'

Reg studied the passport. He looked baffled. 'But that's what it says – fair hair, blue eyes.'

Brenda grabbed the passport and read it in disbelief. 'It should say brown,' she cried. 'All my family have brown eyes. The passport's been switched. And the baby.' Her head was spinning and then the fog began to clear. With crystal clarity she heard Mirabel's words like a mantra in her mind.

*Your sister gets a fresh start; your old man gets help and in return you just have to take care of summat for me... You're going to say yes, and you won't never tell a living soul about our arrangement.*

'Oh God,' she said. 'Oh God.' She leaned on the table with her head in her hands as she realised how cleverly Mirabel had spun her web.



It was early the next morning. Jo and Ali were seated at the breakfast table. Through the hallway Jo could hear her dad singing as he showered.

'Mum, any idea who the patron saint of bookbinders is?'

Ali shook her head. 'Not a clue. But when I was a little girl, I won a book of the saints at Sunday School. I've still got it somewhere! I'll have a look.'

'Thanks.'

'Is this for the treasure hunt?'

Jo started. 'Treasure hunt?'

Ali handed her the morning paper. There was a photograph of a rather studious, dark haired boy with glasses and a bold headline which read:

### *THE MYSTERY OF CHAPTER THREE*

*Young fans of the late writer Everard Burnley are burning the midnight oil in their efforts to decipher a puzzle left by their favourite author. Chapter three of his last book, Scorpion Grass, is a strange riddle – a poem which points to three subterranean locations. We*



*won't give away any secrets, because that would spoil the fun, but we will say that one young reader, Morten Llewellyn, has managed to discover the location hinted at in one verse. On presenting himself there and answering a riddle, he was given a marble. Morten told the Gazette, 'I've no idea what the marble is for, but I'll just keep looking for the other two locations and see if it makes any sense! They must be expecting lots of people to work it out because they had a huge jar of marbles – all the same colour.'*

'Oh.' Jo felt rather deflated and a bit foolish. It hadn't occurred to her that other people would be as interested in the conundrum as she was. She had felt such a special connection to Everard Burnley and when he'd suggested she read chapter three she thought the message was just for her.

Ali noticed Jo looking a bit despondent. 'Reg left something for you,' she said, and handed over a small, heavily padded envelope.

Jo realised at once what was in the package. The silver key. She wondered if the key was part of the treasure hunt. She saw Ali looking expectant, waiting for her to open the parcel but at that moment Paul swept into the room, still singing, and danced Ali around the kitchen. Jo took advantage of the distraction and, gathering up the package from Reg, slipped out the front door.

When Jo arrived at Glory Heights there was a crowd of boys and girls of her age at the reception desk, all clutching *Scorpion Grass*. Jo wandered over and joined them. *This is one of the locations from the poem*, she thought. *Wonder what the riddle will be?*

The receptionist was enjoying herself. A large glass jar of blue/grey marbles stood on the counter. She gave each person a printed slip of paper and a pencil. They read the slip, wrote something down, and handed it back to her. One after another they got a shake of the head and turned away despondently.

Jo noticed a tall, dark-haired boy with glasses who was holding back from the crowd. She recognised

Morten Llewellyn, the boy in the newspaper article. He looked shy. On an impulse she smiled at him. He looked a bit startled, then smiled back. He approached the desk, filled in his slip of paper, and was ceremoniously given a marble by an excited receptionist.

'Well done,' said Jo.

'Thanks. Two down!'

'Do you have an entry form?' asked the receptionist. Jo shook her head. 'There's a small entry fee – a pound to cover costs.'

Jo filled in the form and handed over the money.

'The question is very tricky. Good luck.'

Jo read the question. It was short and to the point.

*What's the pattern?*

She laughed. *I know this*, she thought. *Thank you Sam!*

She confidently wrote the words *arthropods and locations* on the slip of paper, and handed it back. The receptionist beamed, stamped her entry form and handed her a blue/grey unfired marble, made of clay.

She looked round for Morten, but he had vanished.



'So who was the Son of Poseidon?' challenged Matthew.

Jo was prepared. 'Atlas,' she replied confidently.

'And where did he live?'

Jo's confidence was short-lived. 'Um – the Atlas Mountains?' she hazarded.

Matthew laughed. 'Good guess, but last time I looked there were no Pillars of Hercules in the Atlas Mountains. And they couldn't exactly be called subterranean. No, we're looking for somewhere that has vanished. Never a trace left behind.'

Jo was determined to solve the riddle. She read out loud the verse in question.

*I dreamed of limestone layered with shale.  
The Pillars of Hercules framed the place  
Where the son of Poseidon lived and reigned  
Until earthquake and flood left never a trace.*

Realisation dawned. 'Of course. Atlantis.'

'Plato gave a wonderful description of Atlantis,' mused Matthew. 'The walls were built of red, white and black rock and were covered with brass, tin and orichalcum.'

'Orichalcum?'

'Believed to be a gold coloured metal – maybe an alloy of gold and copper.'

'Atlantis wasn't real, was it?'

'I think not. I believe Plato wrote a story to make us think about governments and power. Even so, lots of people do believe it really existed, then was swallowed up by the sea and never seen again.'

'But if Atlantis is one of the locations in the puzzle, no-one will ever find it!'

'It's like Mag Mell,' said Matthew. 'You'll never find that either, but it gets you thinking of underground – or underwater – places. Burnley might have used a little artistic license. Lots of places are named after Plato's vision.'

'There's an Atlantis art shop in London,' said Jo. 'Maybe I need to go there.'

'Maybe,' said Matthew. He was chasing another idea. 'When I was lecturing, I used a very old bookshop in Museum Street to find some of the more obscure texts for my research. That was also called Atlantis. I'm sure it's still there. It might be worth a look.'

'I'll go next weekend,' said Jo excitedly.

'I wish I could come with you,' said Matthew. 'It was a fascinating place.' He changed the subject abruptly. 'Did you give any more thought to trying to heal your aunt's scars?'

'Not a lot,' confessed Jo. 'Did you?'

'I did.'

'Did you come to any conclusions?'

'Yes. I decided that if I could heal her, I would. But it wasn't an easy decision.'

Now it was Jo's turn to steer the conversation somewhere else.

'How much longer will you have to stay here?'

'All being well I'll be home for the weekend. It can't come soon enough. This is a very pleasant room, but it's not home. And the journey isn't easy for Mary, so I miss her.'

'I bet you're glad you can both emp,' smiled Jo. His face looked desperately sad for a moment, but it was so fleeting that Jo paid it no mind.

All he said was, 'Yes. It can be very useful.'

His earlier remark reminded her of something that was worrying her. 'I think Smokey has settled in here too well. He doesn't want to go home.'

'Perhaps that tells you everything you need to know about Smokey's home,' said Matthew gently. 'And he has been through a terrible ordeal. Why don't you get him involved in the treasure hunt? Take him along to the bookshop – or better still, Corsham! I bet he'd love trying to get past the security and explore Burlington... He does have a talent for going where he shouldn't.'

Jo paused, remembering exactly how talented Smokey had become. Ever since she had learned of his new power of invisibility, she had routinely checked his vision to see that he wasn't following her.

'He did offer to break into the museum and find the bones of Summer Moon's ancestors,' she replied, 'but Dad is doing it the normal way. He's written to the museum.'

'Has he had a reply?'

'Just a polite acknowledgment. Nothing concrete.' Jo thought for a bit, then confided in Matthew. 'I don't really see why Summer Moon is so keen to get them back. It's just a load of old bones...'

Matthew looked at her thoughtfully. 'Yet you were upset when you saw just a load of old bodies in the laboratory...'

Jo wanted to object to the comparison, but all her arguments petered out even as she was formulating them.

'Every culture has its own way of dealing with the facts of death, Jo. In this country we use cremation or burial, but for many years cremation was frowned upon. Some religions still forbid it. Then there's the question of what to do with the ashes – some people use fireworks to scatter them, or send them into low earth orbit. After several years they re-enter the earth's atmosphere. I've heard they can be turned into synthetic diamonds for a special piece of jewellery, or even mixed with paint and made into a portrait of the person who died.'

'I wouldn't like to wear jewellery made from dead people,' grimaced Jo.

'Even if you loved them dearly? Wouldn't you like something to remember them by?'

'If I loved them, why would I need something to remember them by?'

'Good question. Yet people do it all the time. I know you are very fond of your great-grandmother's locket...'

Jo conceded the point. 'Now I know how my Dad feels when he argues with Mum. *Stitched up by logic*, he grumbles. You taught her well.'

'She has a remarkable mind.' Matthew looked pleased at the compliment, then continued his theme. 'On my great-grandmother's dressing table was a pretty little covered porcelain pot, painted with pansies. It had a hole in the top and was called a hair receiver. When she brushed her hair, she took any loose hairs from the brush and put them in the pot. She used the hair to make my great-grandfather a wonderful watch-chain. He really treasured it, especially after she died. Because they loved it so much, I treasure it too. I still have it – it is a part of my history.'

'You're saying that's how Summer Moon feels about her ancestor's bones,' observed Jo.

'She feels something far stronger than that, Jo. She believes that their spirits cannot rest until their bones are properly buried.' Matthew paused before

continuing. 'These are profound questions. If I ask you if you'd prefer to be cremated or buried, you'd probably say you'd prefer to stay alive. But that's not an option. Here are some more tricky questions. Do people and animals have souls? If so, what happens to the soul when the body dies? Is there life after death? How about Heaven and Hell? Whatever you've been told, you will have begun to form your own ideas about these questions. We all do.'

'You're going to tell me that there's no right answers, aren't you,' said Jo wearily. 'That's so hard!'

'More likely I'd say there are answers that are right for you but they might not be right for me. And that is fine as long as you don't try to force your ideas on me, or *vice versa*. But I know what you mean. In the past people were told that there was one correct way and everything else was wrong. Must have been a lot easier to just do what you were told and save all that onerous thinking...'

Jo laughed. 'Actually, I quite like onerous thinking.'

'I know you do, dear Jo. It is one of the characteristics that make you special.'

Jo blushed at the unexpected compliment. She covered her embarrassment with words. 'And right now, I'm thinking there's part of the riddle we haven't solved.' She quoted the lines she meant.

*'An invisible path for invisible souls,  
Go beyond heartsease to find the way.'*

Matthew returned to the puzzle eagerly. 'The first line just suggests more questions. I think we need to concentrate on the second line. The word that stands out for me is *heartsease*. It must be connected to the operation I just had, but how?' Matthew reached for the reference book. 'Aha. Here it is. '*Heartsease - Viola tricolour.*'

'Three colours,' said Jo, looking at the picture. 'Purple, yellow and white. I wonder if the colours are significant somehow?'

Matthew was still following a thread. '*Viola - a genus of flowering plants in the violet family.* Violet. I wonder. Go beyond violet and what do you get?

Jo immediately realised where the question was leading. 'Ultraviolet,' she said, unenthusiastically. She told Matthew about the pen torch and the pentagon on the cover of her copy of *Scorpion Grass*.

'Mystery upon mystery,' said Matthew, his eyes shining. 'This is as good as a tonic, Jo. I think you should keep that torch with you at all times! You never know what you might find.' He looked at her shrewdly, realising she looked ill at ease. 'Other than the Blaschko lines, of course.'

Jo sighed. 'Does everybody know about them?'

'Wear them with pride, Jo.'

'That's easy for you to say,' replied Jo hotly.

'I agree. It is easy for me to say.' He rolled up his sleeves. Faint markings, like shadows on his skin, danced before Jo's eyes.

'You too?'

'Me too.' He changed the subject. 'Heartsease is a perfect flower for you, Jo – the girl who loves to think. Another name for heartsease is wild pansy, and that's from the French, *pensée* or *thought*. Shakespeare's Ophelia said, *There's pansies, that's for thoughts.*'

Jo looked again at the illustration. 'It's got some weird names... *Love-Lies-Bleeding*. That's a bit gruesome. *Love-in-Idleness*. *Jack-jump-up-and-kiss-me*. *Three-Faces-under-a-Hood*. *Kit-run-in-the-Fields*. *Godfathers and Godmothers*. *Stepmother*. Who on earth thought of these? And what were they on? *Herb Trinitatis*. *Herb Constancy*. *Pink-eyed-John*. *Bouncing Bet*. *Bird's Eye*. Crazy! I like Heartsease the best.'

'That's a lot of names for a pretty little flower. Just imagine the stories behind the names,' smiled Matthew. 'Now I think it's time for my nap. All this thinking may be enjoyable, but it certainly tires the brain!'



The three women looked down at the sleeping girl. Lethe seemed lost in thought. Bridget's normally lifeless eyes were less blank than before. There was a hint of anxiety in her expression. The nurse looked as if she would rather be any place in the world than Lucy's bedside.

Finally Lethe broke the silence. 'Has she said anything at all?'

The nurse looked even more uncomfortable. 'She hardly makes a sound, Madame, but...'

'But?' Lethe's tone was compelling.

'But it is possible she has said two words. I think one was *Darn*. The other one sounded like gazebo.'

Lethe smiled a slow smile. 'Zebo.'



Smokey looked at Lethe with derision. 'Let me get this straight,' he said. 'You want me to help you find Zebo and Darren? Assuming I could, why would I?'

Lethe took her time replying, savouring the moment. 'Because I can use my considerable power to your advantage. I can, for example, restore your mother's memory so that she remembers her loving son. No longer Smokey, who nobody notices, but Jacob Ashe. Bridget too. Then you could all play happy families. Of course some things would be best forgotten. Bridget's work for CUT, perhaps. Your hatred of Titus and me. Your recent American vacation. I will also expect your full co-operation in your continuing recovery.'

'You couldn't do it,' sneered Smokey. 'It's your sister who helps people remember things. You just make them forget, especially if it suits you.'

'And if I help them to forget their forgetting, that is surely the same as remembering.'

Smokey was silenced. He struggled to keep his face impassive, but clearly Lethe's offer was tempting. He arranged his face into a sullen scowl because he could not bear Lethe to see how deeply he longed for his family to be healed.



'There must be a catch. I can't see that finding Zebo and Darren is worth that much to anyone.'

'I have my reasons, which I have no intention of sharing with you.'

'Why should I trust you?'

'Ah. An interesting question. Your suspicion is completely understandable. I pride myself on being habitually unscrupulous and deeply contemptuous of conventional morality. I rarely give my word to anyone on anything, but interestingly, when I do, I seldom renege on my promise. So I give you my word I will uphold my side of the bargain. What could you possibly have to lose?' She studied him carefully. 'I will even give you a demonstration to whet your appetite. Wait here.' So saying Lethe swept out of the room.

During the few moments she was gone Smokey thought furiously. He had no idea where to search for Zebo and Darren. Both had dropped off the face of the earth when the Ferals scattered. And even if he found them it would be a tall order to persuade them to come face to face with their sworn enemy.

He was still trying to work out what to do when Lethe returned with Bridget.

Even before she spoke, it was clear Bridget had been transformed. Her expressionless, cold eyes were sparkling and bright. She smiled at Smokey.

'Hiya, Jake,' she grinned. He started. Jake was Bridget's pet-name for her beloved kid brother. No-one had called him Jake for years. He willed himself not to cry, but tears were perilously close.

Bridget was talking animatedly. 'I have an idea about Mum's birthday,' she said. 'We could take her to the theatre! She'd love that.'

Smokey looked at Lethe. Her expression was triumphant, secure in the knowledge that, at a stroke, she had wiped Bridget's memory of the belief that her mother was dead. She had obliterated any recollections Bridget had of participating in the dark and dreadful work of CUT. She emped Smokey.

***So shall I pay a visit to your mother, or not?  
Your choice, Jacob Ashe.***

## Chapter Ten – Invisible Paths

When Jo visited Smokey the next afternoon she could see a difference the moment she laid eyes on him. He wasn't giving anything away. His shield was well and truly in place.

'You look better!' she smiled. 'More yourself.'

Smokey grunted noncommittally.

'I wondered if you'd like to help me with the treasure hunt?'

'Depends.'

Jo told him about the Atlantis bookshop and the secret city in Wiltshire. 'I'm going on Saturday. Do you fancy coming?'

'Yeah.'

'Matthew thought you'd like to try and get into Burlington. Just your type of thing.'

'Yeah.'

Jo felt irritated. 'I'm glad we're talking, not emping, but one word answers don't make for much of a conversation, Smokey.'

'Sorry. Got a lot on my mind.' He made a huge effort to re-connect. 'Sounds really interesting. I'll see if Beth wants to come.'

Jealousy coursed through Jo like lightning. 'Oh yes,' she said nastily. 'Mustn't forget your minder.'

'She's not my minder.'

'Well, you never go anywhere without her.'

'I can go wherever I want,' retorted Smokey.

'Come on then. Let's get out of here right now and go for a walk.'

'You know I haven't been given a password yet. And your visitor's pass has limited access and is only for one person.' Smokey clearly intended on keeping his new abilities a secret. Even from Jo.



Jo looked up and down the corridor. There was no one in sight. She stood in front of the security pad by the lift door and carefully typed in her aunt's password. Smokey was watching her like a hawk. 'Obadiah Moon,'

he read out loud. 'That's the American Pastor who helped rescue me, isn't it?'

Jo nodded. 'One of her many ex-lovers.'

Smokey grunted. 'Lucky escape for him.'

Jo placed her hand on the security pad and the lift doors opened. Quickly they scrambled in. As the lift descended, Smokey started to piece things together. 'How did you learn the code, Jo?' he asked.

Jo didn't know what to say to him. He looked at her and grunted. 'So you've been looking through me again, have you? Well, what else did you see?'

Jo sighed and gave in. 'I saw everything, Smokey. Even though no-one else did. I know what you can do.'

To her surprise Smokey looked at her imploringly. She had expected him to lose his temper. 'Please don't tell Beth,' he asked.

Jo's heart leapt as she began to imagine what this could mean, but before she could ask further, the elevator arrived at the foyer. As the doors opened, they were both surprised to see Beth standing there. She looked equally taken aback.

Beth leaped into the elevator with them and jabbed furiously at the button to close the doors. Once the elevator began to rise she turned on them both.

'You idiots,' she hissed. 'What are you doing? How did you get past security?'

'That's for me to know and you to find out,' Jo said provokingly.

Beth continued in an angry whisper. 'If they see Smokey without me, I'll be in so much trouble. And so will he.'

'So you are working for my aunt.' Jo's voice was icy. 'And Smokey is a prisoner.'

'No, he's not. He's a patient. A patient who needs treatment. She says he's not well enough to leave yet, and she's afraid if he goes out on his own, he'll just disappear into the shadows. You know what he's like.'

Jo was contemptuous. 'Aunt Lethe seems very concerned about Smokey all of a sudden, considering how she trapped him – with your help, if I remember correctly – then left him to rot in the Mirror Maze.'

'You know I didn't realise she was planning to kidnap him.' Beth defended herself spiritedly. 'And when I found out, I did everything I could to help get him back. What she did was evil.'

'Quite. So why has she changed her tune?'

'It's because of Mr. Stigmurus. He's determined to make it up to Smokey and reform him. He's insisted that Smokey has everything he wants and stays here until he is completely well. He gave her strict instructions. She wasn't very pleased.'

'She told you that, did she?'

'As a matter of fact, yes. She still trusts me.'

'Astonishing. Trustworthy is the last word I'd use when thinking of you. I would have said your talents lie in other directions.' Jo knew she was being petty, but weeks of heartbreak and resentment were coming to a head. 'So you report back to her.'

Beth was obviously stung, but stood her ground. 'I'm not her spy. But if Smokey goes out, I go with him – not to tell her where he goes, or what he does – just to make sure he comes back here until his treatment is complete.'

Jo's bitterness ran away with her. 'It must suit you down to the ground, spending so much time with him.'

'Yes. As a matter of fact, it does.' Beth's expression was triumphant. 'And from where I'm standing, Smokey seems pretty keen on the arrangement as well. If he is a prisoner, as you seem to think, then he seems more than happy with that – at least as long as I am around.'

'I am here, you know,' observed Smokey mildly. He was rather enjoying watching the two girls squabbling over him.

Both girls glared at him, then simultaneously went to say something, but the lift went ping and the doors began to open.

'Saved by the bell!' laughed Smokey. Jo was shocked. She realised she had never heard Smokey laugh. It sounded better than she had imagined.

Still scowling, Beth all but frogmarched Smokey back to his room. Shutting the door behind him she turned to Jo.

'We are actually on the same side, you know,' she snapped before turning and wading away. Jo said nothing. She simply walked back to the elevator and rode it down to the foyer. She exited the hospital and flagged down a taxi.

'Where to, love?' asked the driver.

'The East End, mate,' came the reply. With a start the driver turned his head. In the back of his cab was not only the girl, but also a pale boy he had completely failed to notice. 'What the...?' was all he could say.

'The East End,' repeated Smokey, still laughing.



During the short journey Jo tried to engage Smokey with her news of secret elevators, hideous underground churches made of bones and the ghoulish organ donors' morgue, but he grew increasingly more distracted the further east they travelled. He said very little, growing more quiet and withdrawn until the taxi drew up outside a small, neat house in a quiet tree-lined street.

'Come back in two hours,' he said tersely to the taxi driver, and with a peremptory 'Come on,' to Jo he headed up a path that led round the side of the house to the back door. Suddenly there were no more smiles. His face was grim.

Jo looked at him anxiously. **You OK?** she emped.

**Just nervous. Don't fuss.**

Smokey stood in the garden for a moment, looking at the old wooden swing dangling from an ancient horse-chestnut tree. He bent and picked up some sleek, shiny conkers, lying half-buried in the long grass.

'Jacob? Is that you?' A pale, tired-looking woman appeared in the doorway, brushing flour from her hands. 'I was wondering when you'd get back. How was school? Come and tell me about your day. I was just making some scones. There's plenty for your friend!'

Smokey just stood and stared. The woman laughed. 'Goodness – you look like you've seen a ghost! Anyone would think you'd been away for a year, not a day! Come and give me a kiss, and tell me all your news.'

'Hello, Mum,' said Smokey. 'It's good to be back.' Lethe Lacuna had kept her word.



Mary Montgomery was so shrewd and perceptive Jo sometimes felt completely transparent. As a result of Lethe Lacuna's malice and machinations, Mary had been a lost soul for years, living from hand to mouth in a disused Underground station; known to all and sundry as Crazy Em. Thanks to Reg and the Righteous, she had been brought back from the gates of death and reunited with Matthew, her childhood sweetheart and colleague. Now she paused from packing Matthew's bag ready for his return home. She fixed Jo with a gimlet eye.

'So young Smokey finally got past the security, eh. Then took you back to meet his mother!'

Jo was indignant. 'Mary! You're not meant to go poking about reading my mind!'

Mary was magnificently unrepentant. 'That'll teach you to shield better. So are you going to tell me how it works, or shall I just ferret it out for myself?'

'You are impossible,' sighed Jo, raising her shield. Matthew chuckled at the pair of them, but wisely kept his opinion to himself. He was looking better by the day.

Mary nodded. 'I like to think so.'

Jo rolled her eyes and gave in. 'There's a password and a pad that recognises blood and DNA and stuff. Anyway, Smokey lurked about in the shadows, like he does, spying on Aunt Lethe, until he saw the password. I thought that maybe my DNA would be a close enough match. And it was.'

'So what's the password?' demanded Mary.

'Obadiah Moon,' answered Jo reluctantly. 'I think he and Aunt Lethe were in love once.'

'Only in her dreams.' The unexpected voice behind her was edged with anger and contempt.

Jo had not heard her mother enter the room. *How long had she been there?*

'Obadiah was the one that got away. Like all of them, he was dazzled by her to begin with, but that soon wore off when he discovered what she was really like.' Ali didn't try to disguise her bitterness.

Jo remembered overhearing Obadiah talking to Lethe.

*Can't sleep for thinking of you, Lethe. I don't deny it. But you chose the path of wickedness, Lady Midnight, and I won't walk your road.'*

She also remembered her aunt's muffled sob as she walked away.

'I thought she really did care about him,' said Jo tentatively.

'That's because you always give her the benefit of the doubt,' snapped Ali. Jo was surprised. Her normally sunny mother was clearly edgy and cross about something.

Ali caught the looks of surprise on Jo, Mary and Matthew's faces. 'And don't any of you try and deep-read me,' she warned.

'Already tried,' said Mary imperturbably. 'That's some impressive shielding you're doing. Your daughter here could learn a thing or two from you.'

'She can shield well enough,' said Ali. 'At least where I'm concerned.' Her voice was defiant, but her eyes were sad. Jo immediately felt guilty, then resentful. These days there was an awful lot of guilt and resentment floating around.

'She's a teenager,' said Mary robustly. 'And you're a middle aged woman. What do you expect.' She studied Ali carefully. 'I think you and I should go in search of a good strong drink, Alithea. These two can get on with their treasure hunt.' So saying she propelled Ali out of the door and left Jo and Matthew exchanging rueful glances.

Eventually Matthew coughed and said, 'Anyway. Where were we? Oh yes. I have been thinking about *invisible paths* and ultraviolet. My best guess is that Burnley is telling you to use the torch to discover some secret markings and they will show you the way to go.'

'Markings made with invisible ink?'

Matthew nodded.

Jo laughed. 'I remember using lemon juice to write coded messages to Sam when we were small.'

'You could have used certain detergents or soap or milk... Some bodily fluids work as well. It's a fascinating subject.'

Jo hid a smile, knowing she was in for a seminar.

'Ultraviolet light is excellent for revealing secret signs.' Matthew warmed to his subject, consulting his trusty reference book. 'It is electromagnetic radiation with a wavelength shorter than that of visible light, but longer than X-rays,' he read. 'The name means *beyond violet* from the Latin *ultra*, meaning beyond; violet being the colour of the shortest wavelengths of visible light. UV light has a shorter wavelength than violet light. Interestingly, these frequencies are invisible to humans, but visible to a number of insects.'

He paused for breath and looked anxiously at Jo. 'I hope this isn't boring you?'

Jo smiled affectionately. 'Not at all,' she replied truthfully.

Reassured, Matthew returned to his book. 'Under ultraviolet light scorpions glow or take on a yellow to green colour. Many birds have patterns in their plumage that are invisible at usual wavelengths but observable in ultraviolet.' His eyes were shining as he looked at Jo. 'I never knew that! When I am out of here, you and I must go on a nature walk with that UV torch of yours! It says here that urine and other secretions of some animals, including dogs, cats, and human beings, are much easier to spot with ultraviolet. Likewise pest control operators can detect urine trails of rodents. Jolly useful. Oh, and butterflies communicate with it during mating.'



Jo suddenly gasped. Matthew looked at her over his spectacles, surprised that his revelations had affected her so much. He realised she was suddenly ill at ease.

'Are you alright, dear? Only there's a marvellous section about using multi-spectral imaging to read illegible documents such as the burned papyruses of the Villa of the Papyri or of Oxyrhynchus, or the Archimedes palimpsest.'

Jo's scar had started to itch. 'Sorry, Matthew. I'll have to pass on that just for now. Aunt Lethe is coming.' She looked round for a way out other than the door and opened the window onto a small balcony. She moved swiftly.

Crouched outside the window, Jo heard her aunt sweep into the room. Lethe's voice was superficially calm, but Jo could sense a cold fury beneath her cool exterior.

'My registrar appears to have made a mistake,' said Lethe. 'Apparently you are down to be discharged this weekend.'

'Yes. He says I can continue to recover at home.'

'How can that be? After such a setback...'

Matthew interrupted. 'Allow me to correct you. There has been no setback.'

'Ah. Not yet. But I predict there will be. With just one flick of a switch, your poor old chest will feel as if it is being squeezed by a boa constrictor. Another flick of a switch and you will experience severe pain in your arms. Another flick and your breathing will be laboured and painful. No wedding bells for you, Old Goat. Just whatever life I choose to allow you to endure.' Lethe's tone switched from malicious glee to pure honey. 'And all this can be so easily avoided. Just persuade my headstrong niece to co-operate and I will be delighted to throw confetti at your nuptial celebrations. If you ask nicely, I might even restore your ability to emp as a very special wedding gift.' Jo heard Lethe head back towards the door. As a parting gesture she hissed impatiently, 'Make it happen. And make it happen soon. Meanwhile, you stay here. Doctor's orders.'

Lethe left the room as quickly as she had entered it. When she was safely out of earshot, Jo came back in.

'Oh, Matthew,' said Jo, her voice full of concern. 'What is she talking about?'

Matthew was silent for a very long time. Finally he spoke. 'You are not to tell Mary that your aunt threatened me. I won't have her worried. Promise me.'

Jo was hesitant to make a promise she would almost certainly regret. 'But won't Mary just deep-read you anyway? As far as I can tell she takes no notice of privacy when it comes to emptying and deep-reading.' This last was said from the heart.

'Since I had the operation I can't empty,' said Matthew flatly. 'I've told Mary it's a temporary side effect of the operation.'

'Oh. So that's why you looked so sad,' remembered Jo. 'But surely that doesn't stop anyone deep-reading you...'

'Go ahead and try,' invited Matthew despondently. 'I won't shield.'

Jo concentrated with all her might, trying to find the connection to Matthew's mind. She used all her abilities, but finally had to admit defeat.

'Did my aunt do this to you?' demanded Jo fiercely.

Matthew shrugged. 'Maybe. She likes to give the impression it's her doing. Or perhaps it really *is* just a side-effect.' He tried to make light of it. 'When you get to my age you don't really need any special abilities in the mind-reading department – human nature is something of an open book at this stage of the game.'

Jo tried to imagine her life without her talents. Even the inconvenient aspects, like sometimes seeing unwelcome sights through Smokey's eyes, or 'over-hearing' someone's unflattering thoughts about her, were worth the benefits. She could tell that Matthew did not want her sympathy.

'Isn't Mary expecting you home this weekend?'

'Yes – I'll have to tell her they need to run some more tests for their research project. That will really annoy her. It's always better to get her mad than to get her worried.'

'What did Aunt Lethe mean about persuading me to co-operate?'

Matthew gave Jo an old-fashioned look. 'First things first. I don't recall you agreeing to promise me that you won't tell Mary.'

Jo grimaced, but Matthew was implacable.

'I promise,' she said eventually, 'but with great reluctance.'

'Your aunt wanted me to heal her scars. I can't. But she is convinced you can.'

'Oh.' Jo's mind was racing. 'And if I don't, she'll shut down your heart?'

'That's right.'

Jo didn't hesitate. 'Of course I will do it. For you. But not for her.'

'Thank you.' Matthew bowed his head, and Jo, so relieved that she was able to help him, didn't see his expression. Had she done so, she would have wondered why he was still so infinitely sad when she had just handed him the solution to all his problems.

'I'll go and find her now,' said Jo, full of positive purpose. She gave Matthew a brief hug and set off in search of Lethe.

Jo was so intent on finding Lethe she nearly knocked Smokey over as she rounded a corner.

'Sorry, Smokey. Have you seen my aunt?'

'You've just missed her.' He pointed out the window as a sleek purple car sped out of sight. 'Look. There goes her limo.'

Jo's shoulders sagged with disappointment. Smokey looked surprised. 'Not like you to be so keen on seeing Her Ladyship,' he observed.

Jo made no answer. Smokey fell in step with her. He seemed positively chatty. 'She's gone off to round up Zebo and Darren – if she can find them. They went underground after that business at the gunpowder factory, but she managed to pick up their trail.' He omitted to mention that he had played a major part in helping Lethe locate the last known whereabouts of the two boys.

Jo was amazed. 'What on earth does she want them for?'

'Search me.'

Jo had a couple of questions she was dying to ask. 'Um, Smokey, is your Mum OK now? Only you said she'd forgotten all about you...'

'That's all in the past,' said Smokey brusquely. 'She's fine now.'

'Didn't she think it strange that you came back here after we visited, instead of staying with her?'

'She has no idea I came here. In fact, she has no idea this place exists. I told her I was going to stay with Bridget for the weekend. She's used to me coming and going.' He changed the subject. 'Anyway, when are you going to show me this tunnel with all the bones and bodies, then?'

Now it was Jo's turn to look surprised. 'I didn't think you were even listening,' she said, her voice betraying some of the hurt she had felt at Smokey's apparent lack of interest in her discoveries.

'Of course I was! Time we had another adventure together.'

'Well, it's Saturday tomorrow, and you and Beth said you'd help me with the treasure hunt...'

'Right. The Atlantis bookshop? Then on to Corsham. Shall we catch the train? I'll check the timetable, and Beth said she'd bring a picnic. Then on Sunday afternoon you and I can go exploring. About three o'clock suit you?'

That was the longest sentence Jo had ever heard Smokey utter. She was flabbergasted, and not a little cagey. 'What's got into you all of a sudden?' She was tempted to try and deep-read him, but resisted. She hated it when people intruded on her thoughts without her permission.

'I've been feeling sorry for myself for too long. Time I sorted myself out. So three o'clock on Sunday?'

'OK. And ten o'clock tomorrow morning for the bookshop.'

As she watched Smokey walk away Jo could have sworn she heard him whistling.

## Chapter Eleven – We Burn a Hot Fire Here

As Jo walked up the garden path she wondered just what had made her mother so angry. She didn't have to wonder for long. A blazing row was in progress between her parents. As Jo hesitated, wondering whether to go in and interrupt, or diplomatically wander off and come back again later, Calico came rubbing round her ankles, demanding to be stroked. As Jo bent down, out of sight of the window, in a split second she settled for being an eavesdropper.

'For crying out loud, Ali. What has got into you?'

'I'm abso-bloody-lutely furious. How could you, Paul?'

Jo's father sounded exasperated and bewildered. 'How could I what?'

'How could you kiss her?'

'What? Who? Kiss who?'

Jo could have pin-pointed the split second when her father realised what was coming next. One moment he was genuinely confused, the next, he obviously knew. 'Oh.'

'My so-called sister. That's who. Look at this photograph.'

There was a pause.

'Where did this come from?'

*Stalling for time*, thought Jo gloomily. *Doomed, Dad. When Mum's on the case you can't fob her off that easily.*

'Looks like a security camera shot.'

'And how did you get hold of it?'

'Some anonymous well-wisher. Probably Lethe. Just turning the knife.' There was a pause, while Ali drew breath. When she continued she was even angrier. 'None of that matters, Paul. What does matter is, in America I was ill, all because of Lethe, and were you looking after me? No. You were clearly kissing her.'

Now it was Paul's turn to sound furious. 'No, I was not.'

'Are you totally insane? The evidence is right in front of you.'

'I did not kiss her.'  
'Don't treat me like a fool, Paul.'  
'And don't be so quick to judge me, Ali. I did not kiss her. She kissed me.'  
There was a long silence.  
Jo remembered Madam Mirabel gloating.

*And the way I sees things, what with your mum being off her head, Gawd love her, and your dad being a bit preoccupied with fighting off that hussy what is no better than she ought to be, and your little friend Smokey all shut away where no bugger can find him, there ain't really no-one looking out for you.*

Paul was also remembering. He was overwhelmed with memories of a solitary evening in America – alone and lonely with a bottle of whiskey in a darkened room. When Lethe banished the darkness with a scented candle, her magnificent beauty was breath-taking. He had struggled to use his long-standing knowledge of her, his justifiable suspicion and his fragile resistance to create a barely adequate shield against her glory and his desire.

*'You don't want me, Lethe, so don't pretend you do.'*

*'You under-estimate yourself, Paul.'* Her voice was low and seductive.

*'Lethe, you always want what Ali has. Until you get it.'*

*Lethe had moved very close to Paul then. She gently stroked his face and whispered very quietly, 'Why do you think I made sure Ali was out of the picture on this trip, Paul?'*

*He opened his mouth to reply but her soft lips covered his before he could speak.*

*He felt himself drowning in desire. His wife had become as an innocent child, wanting to hold hands and go roller-skating, and he was lonely to the depths of his soul.*

*I'm not just fighting Lethe, he thought. I'm fighting me. With a bleak heart, made just strong enough by sheer force of will, Paul pushed Lethe away. 'Please go,' was all he said but there was a harshness caught in his voice.*

*Lethe stood up, and smiled slowly. 'Of course. After all, I have what I came for.'*

*Paul looked puzzled. 'And what was that, exactly?'*

*'Certainty.'*

*'Don't talk in riddles, Lethe.'*

*She walked to the door, then turned, framed in the doorway, edged with light from the hallway, elegant and unruffled.*

*'I know you still want me.'*

*And she was gone.*

*Oh Dad, thought Jo bleakly, effortlessly deep-reading him.*

*'Oh, Paul,' said Ali, doing the same. Sometimes – mostly – her husband was like an open book. She didn't need to deep-read him then. But now her need to understand and forgive was vast so she shamelessly searched his memories to find the man she loved.*

*She looked at him, but he could not meet her eyes. His shoulders sagged and he bowed his head down low. Confronted with his pain and remorse her anger evaporated. Now she just sounded tired and defeated.*

*For a while she was at a loss to know what to say. When she finally found some words, they were someone else's, borrowed for the occasion and tailored to fit. It was a statement, not an accusation. 'Lethe has an arrow in you yet, Paul Lakota, and you know it well.'*

*He picked up his cue, glad to hide behind words half-remembered from his college days. 'Ali, I may think of her softly from time to time, but I will cut off my hand before I reach for her again.'*

*'John Proctor doesn't say that to his wife,' objected Ali.*

*'No. But I am saying it to mine.' Paul's voice grew stronger. 'Ali, I will cut off my hand before I reach for Lethe again.'*

Ali's reply was fierce. 'I don't want you to think of her softly.'

'Neither do I. But it happens. Dear God, it happens. And I fight it. Look for the goodness in me, Ali.'

*I know those lines*, thought Jo, trying to remember their source and glad of the distraction. She felt as if an emotional tsunami had broken over the household. Now the waters had receded, and all was superficially peaceful, but the normally calm seas were littered with wreckage.

*It's from The Crucible*, thought Jo, remembering a school production. Her mother was crying softly and Paul was whispering soothing, gentle words that Jo had no wish to overhear.

She moved away from the house and sat down on the garden wall. Immediately Calico jumped onto her lap and purred contentedly. Jo buried her face in Calico's soft fur as silence fell inside the house.



## Chapter Twelve – Magick and Mugwort

'Well. This is it. The Atlantis Bookshop. 49a Museum Street. The oldest independent occult bookshop in London, it says here. First opened in 1922. We came past this place when we went to the British Museum for a school trip. That was before the Riots, of course. What next?' Smokey was still on his best behaviour – charming, funny and personable.

Jo liked the look of the book shop. Above the main window were three attractive glass panels – the words *Occult*, *Bookshop* and *Magic* painted onto the glass, promising all manner of delights within.

'Let's go in,' said Beth. 'I'm freezing.'

They opened the door and went into a welcoming room full of books about magic and paganism, werewolves and vampires, angels and fairies. Intricately carved symbols hung on the walls along with photographs, paintings and wands. A large and comfy-looking brown leather chair dominated one corner of the shop.

A colourful display of seasonal flowers and herbs caught Jo's eye. She spotted a familiar leaf – dark green on the front, silver on the back, and small, reddish-purple flower heads. *Looks like mugwort*, she thought.

The owner of the shop, a striking woman with abundant dark, silver-streaked hair and a warm smile looked up from her desk. 'Merry meet!' She looked directly at Jo. 'I see you are drawn to the wild wormwood. A more poetic name than mugwort, I think.' She carefully selected a sprig, and handed it to Jo. 'Be sure to carry it with you always.' She held Jo's gaze for a long moment, then nodded to herself, as if satisfied. She laughed. 'So you want to find the hidden treasure...'

'Are you a witch?' breathed Beth, her eyes wide.

'I prefer the term *occultist*. But I am teasing you. Geraldine Beskin. Delighted to meet you.'

Smokey, Beth and Jo introduced themselves. 'Is this your shop?' asked Beth.

'It certainly is. The Atlantis bookshop was set up by magicians for magicians. We continue the tradition today.'

'How long have you been here?' asked Beth. She was fascinated both by the shop and its proprietor.

'My family bought it in the fifties. The shop was founded in 1922, but the building is much older than that. It was built in 1888. One day my father came in here and the man who founded it, Michael Houghton took a good look at him and told him one day it would be his. And so it was. I believe in time my daughter will continue the tradition.'

*It's happened again, thought Jo. Just like it did with Everard Burnley. I feel as if I have known this woman for ever.* The feeling of deep familiarity gave Jo confidence. 'My friend, Summer Moon, is a *Wapiye' Win* – a spirit calling woman. She said mugwort made evil spirits sick and drove them away.'

'It is a famous charm against the loathsome foe,' agreed Geraldine. She looked at Smokey. He was standing by the brown leather chair, with a book about Aleister Crowley in his hand.

*He looks so different, thought Jo. Worried, but happy as well. Whatever is going on with him?*

'Someone started a rumour that the chair used to belong to the famous English occultist, mystic and magician Aleister Crowley,' Geraldine told Smokey. 'As so many before you, you are drawn to him. Like you, he was attracted to the darkness, but unlike you, he sought publicity and notoriety.' She gazed intently at Smokey, her shrewd eyes seeming to see through him; her expression solemn. Unusually for Smokey, he met her gaze full on. The air seemed electric; suddenly full of danger and intrigue. 'Do not underestimate your enemies,' she said at last. 'And do not underestimate your friends,' she added softly.

The atmosphere in the room lightened and Geraldine told Beth about the days when the Rolling Stones and the Beatles used to visit her shop. Beth was clearly captivated and asked more questions about witchcraft. Geraldine smiled.

'Witchcraft is a very benign religion, where you work around the seasons of the year. I suspect you are secretly hoping for something more exciting...'

*She's reading us, thought Jo. But it's different from emping, somehow.*

The sound of the shop door opening interrupted Jo's train of thought. A familiar figure walked in, shy and hesitant. Morten Llewellyn. When he saw Jo he looked uncomfortable as if he just wanted to turn tail and run.

**It's OK.** Without thinking Jo emped him. He jumped slightly; he was either very new to emping or deeply resistant. He shielded immediately and Jo felt snubbed and turned away.

Geraldine greeted the newcomer warmly. 'So you're all here because of the treasure hunt,' she observed. She smiled at Beth. 'Logic, my dear. Not magic.' She went across to the cellar stairs and called out. 'Allardyce! I have some seekers for you!'

There was a pause, followed by the sound of someone ascending the staircase. A man slowly came into view, and Jo felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She felt icy cold. *It couldn't be...*

'Are you alright, Jo?' Beth sounded concerned. 'You look like you have seen a ghost.' Then she too went pale as she looked at the man standing in front of her. 'But you died!' Beth gasped.

The man smiled reassuringly and shook his head. Despite the smile, his grey eyes were sad. 'On the contrary, I am very much alive. Doubtless, you are thinking of my brother, Everard. I was his agent, and together we devised this treasure hunt. He would have been delighted that so many people are taking part. Welcome to Atlantis.'

His words were warm but Allardyce seemed ill at ease. There was an awkward pause, then Geraldine broke the silence. 'Are all of you doing the competition?' she asked. Smokey shook his head. 'Come on, then, Smokey. Let me show you around. In the basement you can hear the Underground trains rumbling along. We'll leave the others to it.'

Jo, Beth and Morten handed in their entry forms. Allardyce seemed startled when he saw Jo's name. 'My brother spoke of you,' he said slowly. 'He said you were very special.' He started to say something else, then stopped. He seemed to be wrestling with himself.

He beckoned Jo away from the others. 'Everard has – had – a wild and reckless streak. People were drawn to him, but he sometimes used their interest very selfishly. After he met you he made a great song and dance about altering the last part of the riddle. He made it more mysterious. He said it would appeal to you. The publisher was furious. I hope he hasn't stirred up any trouble for you...'

An unspoken question hovered between them. Jo thought about the silver key, and the luminous, secret pentagon on the cover of *Scorpion Grass*. She wondered if she should mention them, but something made her hold back. She did not warm to Allardyce as she had to his brother. 'No,' she said, truthfully enough, 'no trouble.' *So far*, she added to herself.

'I understand he left a package for you.' Jo felt again a pressure behind the words.

'Yes,' she agreed. A signed copy of *Scorpion Grass*. She smiled and said no more. She could feel Allardyce wanting more information, but she changed the subject. 'Is there another riddle?' she asked.

Allardyce conceded defeat and returned to the competition. 'Indeed there is. And it is fiendishly difficult.' He held up a jar of marbles. Jo felt in her pocket for the blue-green marble she had been given for guessing the answer to the first riddle. 'No-one has yet given me the correct answer to the Atlantis riddle.'

'Don't people go away, look up the answer in an encyclopaedia and come back and try again?' asked Beth.

'You only get one chance,' he answered. His voice was stern. 'The prize is very beautiful and the competition is suitably difficult. What pleasure would there be in an easy victory? My brother never believed in patronising his readers.'

He handed over the slips of paper containing the riddle. *Put up your shield*, Jo reminded herself. *Beth and Morten can emp. And Smokey. And I bet if I get the right answer, he'd tell Beth in a heartbeat.'*

She looked at the question. Oh yes. It really was a stinker.

*What was orichalcum?*

Beth looked absolutely stumped. She shrugged, then wrote something down and gave in her answer. Morten paused for a moment, deep in thought, then scribbled down a few words. He neatly folded his paper, wrote his name on the front and handed it to Allardyce. They all looked expectantly at Jo. She was racking her brains. What had Matthew said? For a moment, her mind was completely blank. She cast her mind back to their conversation about Atlantis, and focused on listening to Matthew's kindly voice describing Plato's vision. Gradually his words came back to her.

*...a gold coloured metal – maybe an alloy of gold and copper...*

She confidently filled in her answer, and smiled as Allardyce began to open the slips.

He turned to Beth. 'An excellent attempt,' he acknowledged. 'A species of flower is a good guess, especially as you are all aware, I am sure, that scorpion grass is another name for forget-me-not. But sadly, that is not the answer. Let us see what your friends came up with.' He studied Jo's answer first, then Morten's.

'Well done, young man,' he beamed, and opened the marble jar. The marble he placed in Morten's upturned palm had a metallic gold and copper lustre. He went to put the lid back on the jar.

*He's playing with me*, thought Jo, certain that her answer had been correct. She decided she didn't like him very much. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of looking anxious.

She studied the historic posters on the wall. A familiar name leapt out at her from a yellowing sheet of paper.

*Clairvoyant Madam Mirabel  
available for consultations.  
Special rates for His Majesty's forces.*

*The old baggage,* thought Jo as she studied the picture of a younger Mirabel, made up like a wartime film star.

'You know Madam Mirabel?' Geraldine and Smokey had returned and were following Jo's gaze.

'Indeed I do.'

'My father told me she was quite remarkable in her day.'

'She's pretty remarkable now,' said Jo drily.

Allardyce looked irritated with Jo's apparent lack of concern about the treasure hunt. He contrived a little jump, followed by a pantomime of remembering her answer, and rather grudgingly handed her a marble.

Geraldine congratulated Jo and Morten. Smokey gave Beth a consolatory hug. 'So what's the answer?' demanded Beth.

'A gold coloured metal,' replied Jo.

'Oh. Thanks.' Beth's spoken reply was innocuous enough, but her emp was laced with spite. ***Trust you to know that. But then, as you say, my talents lie in other directions.*** With that she gave Smokey a long, lingering kiss.

Jo looked away quickly. She was aware that both Geraldine and Morten were watching her.

***Well done, Jo. Sorry I was rude just now.*** Morten looked apologetic.

***It's OK. Well done to you as well.*** Jo concentrated on not looking at Beth and Smokey.

'Do any of you have all three marbles yet?' Allardyce asked.

'I do now,' said Morten with a grin, producing them from his pocket.

'Then you are ready for the next part of the competition!' He handed Morten a small silver envelope with a blue embossed forget-me-knot. 'I shall expect great things of you, young man.'

Morten flushed with embarrassment and immediately became tongue-tied. He slipped the envelope in his pocket.

Smokey was getting restless. 'We've got a train to catch,' he reminded Beth and Jo.

'Are you going somewhere interesting?' asked Geraldine.

'We're off to Wiltshire,' replied Beth. 'But I'll be back again soon! I really like it here!'

Jo noticed the glimmer of a smile on Morten's face when Beth mentioned Wiltshire. *We're on the right track*, she thought. She felt excited.

As the door closed behind the youngsters, Geraldine looked thoughtful. 'An interesting group,' she observed. 'Unusually powerful.'

Allardyce made no reply. His eyes were fixed on Jo.

## Chapter Thirteen– Playing Gooseberry

Jo inwardly sighed and opened her book as Smokey and Beth embarked on yet another passionate kiss. She had tried concentrating on the view as the train travelled towards Chippenham, but kept catching sight of them reflected in the window. If the buffet car had been open she would have sought sanctuary there, but no such luck.

She re-read chapter three of *Scorpion Grass*. A line jumped out at her with an unsolved part of the puzzle.

*The bookbinder's saint is right at home.*

She had meant to follow up Ali's offer to look in her book of the saints, but her mother had been rather distracted. Time for a quick emp. **Mum! Any idea about the bookbinder's saint?** She carried on thinking about the treasure hunt while she waited for a reply.

She was confident she would get the third marble, one way or another, though she had no idea what would happen next. Morten had all three marbles, but had not been declared the winner, so there was more to come. Allardyce had mentioned another part of the competition when he had awarded Morten the silver envelope. She was curious about that, but something else was niggling away at her.

It felt to Jo that there was far more to the poem than was necessary for the competition – a whole other layer, perhaps. A puzzle within a puzzle. She remembered Allardyce saying his brother had changed the riddle at the last minute, after he met her, and her suspicions grew stronger.

She looked again at the end of the chapter at the lines that seemed to lead her away from the treasure hunt and deeper into the unknown.

*An invisible path for invisible souls,  
Go beyond heartsease to find the way.*



*My soul is steeped in sorrow's mysteries.  
Oh I leape up to my God. Who pulls me doune?*

She remembered Allardyce Burnley describing his twin as wild, reckless and selfish, and felt uneasy. She hadn't liked Allardyce, but she had felt he spoke truthfully. She had liked Everard, but wasn't sure she could trust him.

Her mother's emp broke into her thoughts. ***Saint Bartholomew. Hope that helps!***

***Thanks, Mum. Nearly there, thank goodness.***

Ali read more than Jo had intended to reveal. ***Oh dear. Playing gooseberry is no fun.***



Lethe Lacuna was beginning to wonder why she had bothered. Following on from Smokey's spectacularly vague lead, vast amounts of time and money had been expended in her search for Darren and Zebo. Thanks to frankly outrageous bribes they had eventually agreed to meet her at the Birmingham offices of the Glory Foundation.

She looked at the two boys in front of her, and wondered which of them had fathered Lucy's baby. The sullen blond boy was a nasty piece of work – which, to be positive, might just come in handy one day. The black boy appeared more good-natured – at least on the surface. Lethe fancied she glimpsed some leadership potential and he certainly looked as if he would be very handy in a fight.

'I want to talk to you about Lucy,' she began.

Darren's face remained impassive. The good-natured expression on Zebo's face vanished in an instant. He stood up to leave.

'Well, I don't. She's dead, and that's all there is to say.'

He was at the door when a thought struck him. His fists clenched as he turned round. 'And according to Darren's grandmother, it was your boyfriend who shot her. Did he ever get punished for that?'

Lethe's reply was immediate. 'Did Lucy ever get punished for trying to kill Mary Montgomery? Or, as you knew her, Crazy Em?' Zebo looked astonished. 'Oh, yes, I know all about that. You must be aware I have an extensive network of spies. But we are wasting time. I have not come here to discuss punishment.'

'Just cut the crap then,' snarled Darren impatiently. 'And get on with it.'

'Yeah, right,' sneered Zebo. 'What with the drugs and the pimping and the slicing your schedule is pretty tight.' It was clear there was no love lost between Darren and Zebo.

'It beats working,' mocked Darren. 'What is it you are doing again? Apprentice to an undertaker? Screwed any corpses yet?'

Zebo moved faster than anyone expected and landed a cracking punch on Darren's nose. Blood spurted everywhere. Lethe sighed and pressed the panic button.

Immediately half a dozen guards were on the scene, separating the brawling boys, none too gently. They were pushed back into their seats, where they sat and glared at each other.

Lethe stood up. 'Gentlemen,' she said, 'if you cannot control yourselves long enough to hear something of interest to you both then I will leave and you will never know what I intended to tell you. Neither will you have the opportunity to be paid more money than you can presently dream of. The choice is yours.'

Darren and Zebo exchanged glances smouldering with hate, but nodded their acquiescence. Lethe dismissed the guards.

There was no preamble. Lethe cut to the chase. 'Lucy is still alive,' she said. 'She recently had a baby, and one of you is the father. Congratulations.'

She studied their reactions carefully. Both of them were shocked, but whilst Darren was almost immediately as impassive as before, just for a moment Zebo looked pleased before the shutters clanged down. Both boys were doing some swift mental arithmetic

Lethe drummed her fingers. 'Well? Believe me, it is worth it for both of you that we discover the answer. In the absence of any denials should I deduce that either of you could have fathered this child?'

Darren gave a dry bark of a laugh. 'And the rest.'

Zebo half-rose from his seat, but this time Darren was ready for him, with his fists raised. He laughed derisively. 'Oh, give over, Zebo. She'd shag anybody. And you know it.'

Zebo looked directly at Lethe. 'It could be my baby,' he acknowledged. 'But I dumped her after I found what she did to Crazy Em. That's when she picked up with this piece of garbage.'

Darren took no notice of Zebo's insult. He had been thinking. As he looked at Lethe, he wondered why she wore such a heavy veil. He remembered that she was a very beautiful woman as well as powerful and intelligent. For a clever woman she seemed remarkably thick. 'How come you don't know? It must be dead obvious. Black means it's his; white means it's mine.'

Lethe was silent. Now was not the time to go into the complexities of genetics.

'Is it a boy or a girl?' asked Zebo.

Again Lethe said nothing. Darren worked it out. 'You don't know, do you? Have you ever seen this baby?'

'The baby has been kidnapped,' said Lethe carefully. 'So no. I don't know what it looks like. Or its gender. I am, however, offering a huge reward for the child's safe return.'

'Why can't Lucy tell you what the brat looks like?' demanded Darren.

Lethe observed to herself that Darren was not as dense as he appeared to be.

'Because she is in a coma and has only said two words. Your names.'

'I want to see her,' demanded Zebo.

Darren laughed again. 'I suppose shagging a girl in a coma is a bit better than shagging dead ones,' he said.

Zebo had had time to regain his composure. 'You talk a lot about shagging for someone who cried for his

Mummy the first time he did it.' The shaft hit home. Darren's pale skin flushed a dark, brick-red. Zebo pressed his advantage. 'Yeah, Lucy told me. Perhaps if you hadn't knocked her about she wouldn't have come crawling back, telling me all your secrets.'

Darren, humiliated and furious, turned on Lethe. 'What's so special about this kid anyway? How come you're so keen to get your hands on it?'

'I will be paying you to do a job,' said Lethe haughtily. 'Not become my confidantes. My reasons are not for you to know. I assume that, if the child is yours, you'd want to find it.'

Darren grunted. 'Why would I care?'

Lethe looked at Zebo. 'Do you feel the same way?'

His answer was a long time coming. 'I do care. Doesn't anyone know what the baby looks like? What about the midwife?'

Lethe shrugged. 'I believe there is one person who can answer all these questions,' she said, and now she looked straight at Darren. 'Your grandmother. I'm hoping you can persuade her, for a substantial fee, to tell you what happened to Lucy's baby.'

For the first time something like a smile crept across Darren's face. It was a far from pleasant smile. 'Yeah,' he said slowly. 'That could be fun.'



The bus journey from Chippenham to Corsham had taken longer than they had expected. 'We're not going to have much time,' said Beth. 'Anyway, I'm out of the competition now. After all, my talents lie in other directions. Or so I'm told.'

'Oh, give it a rest,' sighed Jo.

Beth was enjoying winding Jo up. 'I was thinking we might split up and meet back here at six?'

'You mean you and Smokey go off together and I'll be left on my own?' Jo sounded as annoyed as she felt.

'Actually, that's not such a bad idea,' said Smokey. 'You said you've got to get to some church or other, and we don't fancy that, do we, Beth?'

'Not a bit,' smiled Beth, although Jo would have described her expression as more simpering than smiling. 'My interests lie in other directions.'

'Sorry, Jo,' said Smokey, 'but I really want to try and get a look at this underground city – what's it called?'

'Burlington,' muttered Jo sullenly.

'That's it. Burlington. And Beth wants to see it too, don't you Beth?'

'Oh yes,' agreed Beth blithely. 'That sounds like a much better direction.'

'You can't just walk in there, you know,' objected Jo. 'There are guards and gates.'

'Nothing I can't handle,' answered Smokey cockily.

'I wanted to see Burlington as well,' Jo objected, horribly aware she was sounding petulant.

'Honestly!' laughed Beth lightly. 'What is it with you and Smokey and underground tunnels? Sorry, Jo, but there's just not time to do both. We'll tell you all about it on the journey back!' And with that they were off, taking the picnic with them.

Jo muttered something very childish under her breath about it being in the nature of tunnels to be underground.

Accepting the inevitable, Jo set off to explore Corsham. Her grumpiness soon disappeared – she liked the Cotswold market town and enjoyed revisiting its old fashioned streets of houses ranging from pretty cottages to fine Georgian villas of mellow Bath stone.

She was studying the quaintly-named Particular Baptist Chapel when a flash of colour caught her eye. She turned in time to see a peacock close by, shimmering his gorgeous green and gold tail feathers into a glorious fan. She was delighted. Her mood was completely transformed, and as she walked towards the magnificent church of Saint Bartholomew, she stopped thinking about Smokey and Beth and whatever they were up to, and decided to enjoy her adventure.

For all her ambivalence about religion, Jo was unequivocally in favour of old churches. She wandered round the graveyard for a while, and laughed out loud at Sarah Jarvis's epitaph.

*"SARAH JARVIS"  
who departed this life the  
11th day of December 1753  
in the Hundred and Seventh  
year of her age.  
Some time before her Death  
She had fresh Teeth.*

She was interested to see that the fine clock was paid for by parishioners as a memorial to the Reverend William Pym, who died, aged thirty three, in 1872 from blood poisoning after being bitten by his favourite dog.

*That's sad. He was so young. This place is full of stories,* thought Jo, as she imagined the lives of all these people, now long gone. As she walked around she nearly forgot the reason she was there. She almost succeeded in banishing all thoughts of Smokey and Beth together.

Then it happened. Out of the blue she saw, in her mind's eye, an old escalator, long disused, stretching deep underground. She could see Beth running down the metal steps, laughing as she ran. *Oh no,* she thought. *Smokey's so relaxed he's forgotten to shut me out and I can see what he's seeing.*

She used all her powers of concentration to try and blot out the images, but they came thick and fast. Jo saw a vast subterranean canteen, with creamy-yellow walls. There were rows of tables set for eight, and chairs covered in red material. On the counter was a large urn and an old fashioned espresso machine. Jo watched in horror as Beth moved closer to Smokey, her eyes dancing an invitation.

***Put your shields up, for crying out loud.***

Jo felt a brief moment of satisfaction as Beth's eyes opened wide with alarm, then the images were gone. She breathed a sigh of relief, and walked into the church.

Once inside the peaceful old building she particularly enjoyed looking at the details. The 15th century stone font was panelled with Tudor roses and the corbels supporting the roof timbers were intricately

carved with several heads, including a king, a queen, a man wearing a turban and a demon.

The memorials in the side chapels were interesting and moving. Jo stood in front of one, a small figure of a sleeping child, for some time. The inscription commemorated Constance Methuen who died in 1849, aged two. Jo found herself thinking of the twin she might have had, if her mother's pregnancy had been normal. Instead the other foetus had died, and Jo, still developing in the womb, absorbed her twin's DNA, becoming a chimera.

Standing there, deep in thought, she was not aware of the other people in the church. A middle-aged woman went up to the organ, and sat down to play, and a shy, dark haired boy sat in a side chapel, never taking his eyes off Jo.

*Aunt Lethe said I have a brother somewhere,* thought Jo. *I wonder if that's true?*

Jo carried on exploring the church, but she was preoccupied with thoughts about her family. She glanced in to the Methuen family private chapel, where a fairly modern alabaster tomb showed Lady Eleanor, a talented artist, both as an adult and the child she had been. Flanking the East window, an earlier Lady Methuen's likeness could be seen in the shape of two marble angels.

Jo was suddenly jolted from her musings when she heard a familiar hymn tune. The rich notes of the organ rang out, and the organist sang words Jo had not heard since she was small.

*Daisies are our silver,  
Buttercups our gold:  
This is all the treasure  
We can have or hold.*

*Raindrops are our diamonds  
And the morning dew;  
While for shining sapphires  
We've the speedwell blue.*

*These shall be our emeralds—  
Leaves so new and green;  
Roses make the reddest  
Rubies ever seen.*

*If that's not a clue, nothing is,* thought Jo, and she walked confidently towards the musician.

'Thought I was going to have to sing all six verses,' laughed the organist as she turned to face Jo.

Jo stared at the pleasant, silver haired woman with the familiar black streak. She laughed in her turn. *Good grief,* she thought. *Triplets. So far. How many more of them are there?*

'Angharad Burnley, at your service. Sister to Everard and Allardyce. Have you met my brothers?'

'Indeed I have. I'm Jo Lakota.'

'Aha. Everard took quite a shine to you, Jo Lakota. Well, I live just across from the church, in Honeysuckle Cottage, and I keep an eye out for the treasure seekers, especially at weekends. I suppose you would like to see the jolly old riddle?'

'Yes, please. I hope it's not as hard as the last one!'

'Depends if you like cryptic crosswords.'

'Actually, I do. My friend Matthew has been teaching me how to look at the clues.'

'I'm guessing he's not a friend of your own age?'

'No. He used to be my mum's teacher. He's getting over a heart operation, so he's got lots of time at the moment.'

'My grandfather was like that. We used to read *The Reader's Digest – How to Increase your Word Power*. And he taught me how to play Cribbage. A spiffing game. Well, jolly good luck, old bean. Here's the riddle!'

Jo looked at the words on the slip of paper. They seemed to make no sense at all. She held on to the thought that they were designed to lead her astray. If only Matthew were here! She thought about emping him, but, apart from that not being fair, she remembered sadly that he wasn't able to emp anymore. So she was on her own. The thought made



her resentful. *Trust Smokey and Beth to make themselves scarce. Not that they would be much good at this,* she added spitefully.

Even as she thought about them, her unwelcome ability to see what Smokey was seeing kicked in. They usually managed to muddle along, what with him blocking her and her own wish not to pry or be confronted with things she'd rather not see, but as with emping, strong emotion had a way of breaking down barriers.

Jo's flash of anger and spite matched Smokey's rising passion for Beth. Jo saw a small sick-bay, with a metal framed hospital bed. As the bed table was pushed out of the way it was clear Smokey and Beth were exploring each other, not Burlington.

Devastated, Jo blocked them out as quickly as she could and forced herself to concentrate on the words now dancing in front of her eyes.

*Bertie calls, 'Make ample provision,' but through the baffle gate something is hidden.*

Jo struggled to blink back tears. *Think,* she said to herself fiercely. *And not about them. The clues are always about the place where they are given out. So this is bound to be about Burlington. Well, the first bit is obvious - Burlington Bertie - the song Matthew sang. Make ample provision... stock up? Maybe. And what the hell is a baffle gate? And presumably the thing that is hidden is the answer.*

She tried hard to remember all that Matthew had said about Burlington. He'd said that over the years it has had all sorts of names.

*Maybe it's Burlington's other names. Another was Stock something... Make ample provision... Got it! Stockwell! No real point in thinking any more about the baffle gate because that will just be the third name, baffling me, and it's the fourth one that's hidden. Matthew always said that a good clue should have at least two meanings, so maybe the thing that is hidden, the fourth name, also means something that is hidden*

– like a secret... or deception... something hush-hush or cloak-and-dagger...

She felt the answer lurking on the edge of her memory. Because she wasn't bothered about *baffle gate* the answer to that part suddenly slipped easily into her mind. *Turnstile*, she remembered and then the final piece of the jigsaw fell into place.

She wrote down the answer and handed it over to Angharad Burnley, who chuckled with delight. 'Oh, very well done,' she said. 'Super. *Subterfuge* it is. One of the names Burlington has been known by. A delightful deception! And here is your marble.'

She ceremonially handed over a marble made of the same mellow Bath stone Jo had admired earlier.

'Have to dash,' she said. 'Time for my car maintenance class. By the way, have you got all your marbles?' She laughed uproariously at her own joke. Jo smiled and showed them to her. 'Super. Here's the clue for part two.' She gave Jo a small silver envelope embossed with a blue forget-me-not. 'Best of luck!'

The church seemed very quiet once Angharad left. Jo sat in a pew and placed the three marbles in front of her. 'Gold and orange glass, yellow stone and blue-ish clay,' she said. 'Now what?'

She looked heavenwards as if for inspiration, and it was then she noticed the shy, dark-haired boy. 'Morten,' she said, with genuine pleasure. 'How nice to see you! How come you're here? I thought you had all your marbles.' She grinned. 'That joke is rather unavoidable, I'm afraid.'

Morten emerged from the shadows and came and sat by Jo. She was surprised by how immeasurably cheered up she was by his presence. 'I just wondered how you'd get on. So I came along. I was really hoping you'd work it out. I don't think anyone else has all three marbles.'

'You must have been on the same train as us,' said Jo. 'I wish you'd joined us. I was a total spare part. Three was very definitely a crowd.'

Morten grimaced in sympathy. 'I wasn't on the train. My dad gave me a lift up to London so I could go to

the bookshop. Then I came back with him. We live near here, which is why I worked out the Burlington riddle so early on.' He paused. 'I wish I'd offered you all a lift – Dad wouldn't have minded. I just felt too embarrassed.'

'Never mind. How about we go somewhere and have a cup of tea and see if we can work out the next part of the puzzle?'

'I'd like that,' said Morten. 'There's a place near the bus stop that does brilliant cakes.'

'Spiffing,' laughed Jo. 'Because I am absolutely starving!'

**PROMO COPY**

## Chapter Fourteen – Why a Pentagon?

'You're still here, then, Matthew?' Reg was not one for small talk. Hospital visiting was not his forte. 'I thought they were sending you home this weekend.'

'So did I,' replied Matthew despondently. 'Still, it won't be too much longer.' *Just as soon as Jo heals Lethe's scars,* he thought.

'And then it will be nothing but wedding bells and confetti,' joked Reg. 'You'll have to get a new hat, Brenda.'

There was an awkward silence. Brenda seemed a million miles away. From time to time she glanced at the baby in the carry-cot, but her eyes were lifeless and her face was pale and drawn.

'I said, *You'll have to get a new hat,* Bren. For the wedding.'

Brenda made a visible effort to concentrate on Reg's words and reply, but her voice just tailed off. 'Yes. I suppose...'

Matthew exchanged worried glances with Reg. 'That's a bonny baby, Brenda,' he said admiringly. 'How is your sister?'

'She was OK the last I heard,' mumbled Brenda. She made a valiant attempt to focus. 'Reg, have you sorted out everything with Smokey?'

'Pretty much.'

'What's going on with Smokey?' asked Matthew, with interest.

Reg looked decidedly shifty. 'Tell you another time,' he mumbled. Clearly seeking a distraction he said, 'Would you like to hold the baby, Matthew? She's a dear little lass.'

'Matthew smiled. 'It's been a long time since I cuddled a baby,' he admitted. 'I'd love to.'

There was a pause. Reg looked at Brenda. 'Bren?' he prompted. 'Pass the baby to Matthew, there's a dear.'

Even the most unobservant onlooker would have noticed that Brenda almost shuddered as she lifted up the little girl.

Once in Matthew's arms the baby chuckled softly and happily. Brenda seemed to relax and the three of them chatted quietly.

The peaceful scene came to an abrupt end, with a loud knocking on the door. One of the nurses came in, looking flustered and apologetic, accompanied by a policewoman. She went straight to Brenda.

'Mrs. Norton? Would you come with me, please?'

'What's the problem, officer?' asked Matthew, reluctantly parting with the baby as Brenda, confused and worried, gathered together her belongings.

Reg sprang to his feet, standing between Brenda and the policewoman, who smiled kindly.

'Don't worry, sir. She's not in any trouble. This is a personal matter.' The policewoman put a kindly hand on Brenda's shoulder and led her gently out of the room.

Bewildered, Reg turned to Matthew.

'What was all that about, then?'

Matthew looked crestfallen. 'I'm afraid I have no idea, Reg.'

'You couldn't read her mind?'

Matthew shook his head. 'It's a temporary side-effect of the surgery,' he said, and he hoped, with all his heart, that he was speaking the truth.



Jo and Morten did full justice to hot buttered crumpets, lemon cake and a pot of tea. Only then did Jo fish in her pocket and take out the marbles and the envelope Angharad had given her. She put the marbles onto a tea plate, and carefully opened the envelope and looked inside. She read the contents carefully. She looked completely baffled. 'Have you opened yours yet?' she asked.

'As soon as I got out of the shop,' laughed Morten. 'It's a bit cryptic, isn't it? It just says *Why a pentagon?*'

Jo's mind raced as she remembered the luminous pentagon on the cover of her signed edition of *Scorpion Grass*. All her thoughts led to dead ends, though. Nothing useful came into her mind. Defeated,

she shrugged her shoulders and looked at Morten. 'I haven't got a clue. How about you?'

Morten shook his head. 'No – so maybe we should focus on the marbles. One of yellow stone; one blue-grey clay; one orange and gold glass.'

'All different sizes. I expect that's important. This orange one is by far the biggest; then the blue-grey one is a tiny bit bigger than the yellow one. Unless that's just random. Let's have a look at yours.'

Morten compared the two sets, and pronounced them identical. 'So the sizes do mean something,' he said. 'But what?'

Jo picked up the glass marble and squinted through it. 'It's like a little ball of fire,' she said.

Morten stared at her, his mind whirring furiously. 'You've cracked it!' he said excitedly.

'No, I haven't,' protested Jo, utterly confused.

'Sorry – I meant to say you've solved it! Or part of it, anyway.'

'I'm completely mystified,' said Jo. 'Please tell me what I've said that was so clever.'

'You said it was like a ball of fire,' said Morten, all his shyness banished in the light of his excitement. 'What's the biggest ball of fire in the universe?' He answered his own question. 'The Sun! I think we're looking at three planets.'

Jo caught on quickly. 'So this blue-ish one would be Earth... I've heard it called the Blue Planet. Never heard of a yellow one, though.'

'I have,' said Morten slowly. 'Saturn, for a start, but also Venus, because it's surrounded by yellow clouds of sulphuric acid. I don't think it can be Saturn, because Saturn is bigger than Earth. The fact that the yellow marble is the smallest points to it being Venus. Not only that – Venus is a rock planet, and this yellow stone marble is more or less a rock...'

'Elementary, my dear Morten,' smiled Jo. 'So. The Sun, Earth and Venus. But where does that take us?'

'To the Library,' said Morten. 'Drink up!'

Jo did as she was told, secretly amazed at Morten's transformation. Before he had been shy and awkward; now he was positive, energetic and assertive.

They practically ran to the library. It was nearly closing time, but the librarian clearly had a soft spot for Morten and smiled indulgently as he burst through the doors.

He went straight to the reference section, and took down a huge old book called *Astronomy for the Young Enquirer*. He turned to the index, found what he was searching for and then looked up, his eyes shining.

'I wondered why we only had three planets,' he said. 'It had to be a special configuration. And it is. It's called the Venus Transit. Listen to this!'

*A **transit of Venus** across the Sun takes place when Venus passes directly between the Sun and Earth, and becomes visible against the solar disk. Venus can be seen from Earth during a transit as a small black spot moving across the face of the Sun. The duration of such transits, similar to a solar eclipse by the Moon, is usually measured in hours.*

*Transits occur in a pattern that repeats every 243 years. There are pairs of transits eight years apart then long gaps of 121.5 years and 105.5 years. The last pair occurred in December 1874 and December 1882. The next pair of transits of Venus will take place on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2004 and June 6<sup>th</sup> 2012.*

'That's amazing!' said Jo. 'To be able to pin down the exact day like that. But I don't see how it answers the question.'

Morten was elated. 'Coming right up,' he grinned.

*Over ten transits, Venus traces the shape of a pentagon across our solar system.*

'That's it! You've won!' said Jo, all smiles.

'We've won,' he corrected.

Jo shook her head. 'You did most of the work, Morten.' A persistent thought wouldn't be ignored,

however. *But it's not over. I'm sure the clues lead further on. There's more to come.*

'I couldn't have done it without you,' he argued. 'We'll share the prize, whatever it is. Let's go and find Miss Burnley straight away!'

'We'll have to hurry,' said Jo. 'It's not long before my bus.'

'Come on then,' said Morten, and he reached for Jo's hand. They thanked the librarian as they rushed out, and were soon racing back towards the church.

They were disappointed to find no-one in at Honeysuckle Cottage. 'She's at her car maintenance class,' remembered Jo.

'Never mind. I'll pop the form through the letterbox and we'll see what happens next! Give me your phone number and I'll ring you as soon as I hear anything.'

Jo jotted down the number then looked at her watch. 'I have to go,' she said regretfully.

'I know a short cut,' said Morten, and off they dashed again.

As they approached the bus stop Jo could see Beth and Smokey entwined in a passionate embrace. They sprang apart when they saw Jo and Morten.

'How was Burlington?' asked Jo sweetly.

Beth blushed and Smokey looked awkward. 'We only saw a bit of it, then one of the guards spotted us.'

'Next time you come, I'll show you how to dodge the guards,' promised Morten. 'Oh, and thanks to Jo, we solved the treasure hunt, as well!'

The bus came into sight. Then, before Jo had time to think about it, and to everyone's astonishment, but especially Morten's, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him softly on the cheek.

As the bus pulled away she looked back to see Morten standing in the middle of the road, looking as if he had just been struck by lightning, his hand absent-mindedly touching his cheek. Jo smiled to herself. It had been a very good day, after all.



## Chapter Fifteen – The Visitor

Mirabel normally had a nice lie-in on a Sunday morning, but this time was very different. As she dozed, half-way between sleeping and waking, she dreamed of Sebastian. Everywhere she went, she saw his face. Leering at her through windows, reflected in puddles. No matter what happened, she could feel him stalking her, drawing ever closer. She ran to escape him and in so doing, found herself in an abandoned factory.

As the shadows grew longer, she felt a rising terror that she could not control. His voice whispered to her from all directions, calling her name. His laugh echoed across her soul and before she knew it, she was paralysed. As the shadows and laughter and fear engulfed her, she awoke with a start. But far from being relieved, the feeling of impending doom haunted her. She could feel a looming menace just out of sight. She lay there rigid, trying to relax. She had almost succeeded when she heard the tiniest of scratching sounds. In a cold sweat she listened intently as the noise came again.

The sound was almost imperceptible, but her senses were, by now, on full alert. Someone was trying to turn a key in the front door lock. Apart from Titus, only one other person had ever had the key to her door.

Fully awake, she darted to the dressing table, rummaged in the drawer, then moved towards the door. She peered through the spyhole. Her worst suspicions were confirmed.

'Gran? It's me. Darren. My key won't work.'

'I changed the locks after you turned evil,' replied Mirabel with a calm she did not feel.

There was a sound like a muffled sob. 'I'm so sorry, Gran. You always looked after me, and I treated you so badly. Please let me in. I could really do with your help.'

'You in trouble again?'

'No. I've changed my ways. Please let me in, Gran. It's perishing out here.'

Mirabel tiptoed over to the telephone and lifted the receiver. The phone was dead. *Little bastard cut the line.* She could hear him fiddling, trying to pick the lock.

'Just getting my dressing gown, dearie,' she called. 'Hang on.' She was thinking furiously, trying to work out a plan. She returned to the dressing table.

Then the time for thinking was over. The door burst open and Darren flew at Mirabel, his butterfly knife flashing like quick-silver. He shoved her back onto the bed, his blade at her throat.

'Where's the kid, you old bitch?'

Mirabel struggled to keep calm, but she knew Darren was vicious and dangerous. She had taught him well. After Darren's mother killed herself, Mirabel had brought him up. Together they had wrought a terrible vengeance on Darren's father. Mirabel's grandson had proved an able accomplice in the art of torture.

Despite her terror, Mirabel, who prided herself on being a skilful poker player, had an ace or two up her sleeve. She had always been able to pin-point a person's particular weakness, and the little boy in her not-so-tender care had been no exception.

'Spiders,' she whispered. Her voice insinuated itself into Darren's imagination. 'Huge black spiders, scuttling over your face. Eight bristly legs, touching your mouth...'

He pressed the blade, drawing blood and stopping her in her tracks. Darren laughed mirthlessly. 'Those old tricks don't work anymore. I'm a big boy now. I've learnt some tricks of my own.' His razor-sharp knife danced across her face. 'Tell me where the kid is, or I swear I'll cut you to ribbons.'

His voice was confident, but Mirabel was a seasoned adversary and she knew her words had had some effect. She whispered again. 'Spiders crawling into your mouth and up your nose; stopping you breathing... scuttling all over you...'

'Shut it!' The knife flailed wildly and Darren, weakened, swayed slightly. Mirabel seized her moment.

She pulled a pearl-tipped hat-pin from her hair and plunged the point deep into Darren's neck.

He rallied and laughed. 'Is that all you've got, Granny dear? Imaginary spiders and hat-pins? Start talking, or...'

'Or what? You can't kill me, you stupid little bleeder, or you'll never find her. I'm the only one what knows where she is. So you'd better show some respect.'

'It will be more fun my way,' sneered Darren, and he deliberately dragged the point of his knife down the side of Mirabel's face. She cried out briefly, as a fine red line ran like a crack down her cheek. She gave a terrible smile. She seemed to be counting.

'Five, four, three, two, one. I should sit down if I was you, Darren. You're looking a bit pale.'

Darren's eyes widened in alarm as he fell back onto the nearest armchair. His normally pale face was turning grey, his mouth tinged with blue. He clutched at his gut and tried to speak. No words emerged from his lips.

'Save your breath, Darren. You ain't got much left. You asked me if spiders and hat-pins was all I had. Well, no, as it happens. A poor old pensioner needs a little bit extra sometimes. A little drop of poison comes in very handy in an emergency. Now, you listen to me.'

Darren's face was a mask of horror. Only his eyes moved as he watched the old woman take something from her handbag.

'She's a lovely little girl. I calls her Bella. Have a good look at this photograph of your daughter. You ain't done much to be proud of in this life, but you have fathered a lovely little girl. And just so you can die happy - 'cos you are going to die, Darren, and it won't be long - I'm going to keep her safe. Safe from Titus and his Child of Glory malarkey; safe from Lethe bloody Lacuna and her experiments and safe from the likes of you. She ain't gonna grow up like your poor mother, and her poor mother, come to that, and fall for the first no-good charmer who sweet-talks her into dropping her drawers for him. She ain't gonna get knocked about, knocked up and knocked out by some cowardly

bully who's mean with his money, cruel with his mouth and quick with his fists. She's my little princess and she is going to have a good life.'

Mirabel surveyed the almost lifeless figure in front of her. 'I wish it hadn't come to this, Darren, but I wouldn't trust you to come in out the rain, let alone look after Bella. I bet Her Ladyship promised you a shed-load of money to find her, didn't she? She's planning to go against Titus, I reckon, and take over the Glory Foundation. She'll want to use Bella to control him. Well, it ain't gonna happen. Like I said, your daughter is going to have a good life. Whatever it takes. And considering what you were planning to do to me, you're getting a good death. Fairly quick. Fairly painless.'

Darren's eyes followed Mirabel as she went to get a blanket from her bed. She tenderly covered him with it and tucked it round him. 'And just for the record, since where you're going it don't matter who knows, Titus was your grandfather, and Bella's great grandfather. Which is something her Ladyship don't know and she ain't never going to. And you ain't gonna be telling her.'

Mirabel sighed deeply. 'I could murder a cup of tea,' she said. She went and put the kettle on, then came back and sat down facing Darren.

'Just one last thing. You thought I drove your poor Mum to kill herself, which is why you went all evil on me. Well, I never harmed a hair of her head. We did have one almighty argument, because she went back to that waste-of-space father of yours even after he beat her up so badly she lost the little baby she was carrying. You was only little, and she wanted to take you as well and I wouldn't let her. She was crying, and you was crying and we nearly had a tug-of-war with you in the middle. But I wouldn't let you go. I'd seen what he did to you with his belt and I kept you with me. You cried for her something terrible, though. And not long after, she couldn't take no more and my lovely Darlene hung herself.'

Mirabel was silent for a while. She wiped away the tears that had begun to fall, mingling with the blood on her cheek. Darren's eyes were almost closed now.

'Later on you remembered some of it and thought I drove her away and you turned against me. Pity really. We could have been a good team, you and me. Once upon a time you was a nice little lad, Darren.' She reached for his hand and sat and held it as his life ebbed away. When she was sure he was dead she kissed his forehead, closed his eyes then made a cup of tea.



Matthew put down his newspaper and picked up the telephone. He chuckled appreciatively as Jo told him all about the treasure hunt. 'The Transit of Venus, eh? Well, I never. I wonder what the prize will be? There was a wonderful literary treasure hunt a while back – the prize was a golden hare encrusted with precious stones.'

'The book was called *Masquerade*, wasn't it?' replied Jo. 'Mum's got a copy.' She was quiet for a while then decided to confide in Matthew. 'I keep thinking there might be another layer to the riddle. Something just for me. I'm going to have another look in the tunnel this afternoon...'

'Not on your own, I hope,' said Matthew sternly.

Jo quickly reassured him. 'Oh no, Smokey's going to come with me. Just a quick look before Mum gets here. She said to tell you she'll be along in time for tea and cakes.'

'Don't forget the torch Burnley left for you.'

'It's right here in my pocket,' said Jo.



Two cups of tea later and Mirabel felt fortified. She swirled the dregs of her tea three times, and gently poured away the liquid, leaving clusters of tea leaves around the inside of the cup.

'Got a visitor on the way,' she said to herself. 'A woman, by the looks of it. And what have we here?'

Oooh. A big surprise. Wonder what that's going to be? And here's my darling princess, bless her little cotton socks. Hmm. Someone's going on a journey... 'spose that could be our Darren... Oh dear. That'll need sorting out PDQ. I wish Titus was here. He'll know what to do.'

She went to pick up the phone, then remembered it was dead. She swore roundly, then tried emping Titus.

***Mirabel needs Cuddles urgently.*** 'Might work, I 'spose. Can't never be certain with him.'

There was a loud knock at the door. Mirabel tutted. 'Can't be 'im already. He's got a key. Whoever can it be? I 'aven't even 'ad my breakfast yet!' She called out 'Won't be a mo...' and bustled around the room, arranging an old screen around Darren. The outline of him could be seen through the bamboo slats – it just looked as if he was sleeping. She closed the curtains nearest to him so that part of the room was shadowy, then went to the door.

She peered through the spyhole and saw Brenda standing there. She opened the door quickly and pulled Brenda in.

'What the hell are you doing? I told you never to come here! And where's my princess?'

Brenda looked pale and drawn, but the zombie-like persona of the day before was completely gone. She squared up to Mirabel. 'I'm just here to tell you our little arrangement is finished. Oh, don't worry. Bella is perfectly safe. I wouldn't cause her any harm. But I want my niece back and you can have Bella.'

Mirabel was aghast. 'Have you gone stark starin' mad? What about our deal?'

'The deal's off, Mirabel. Get used to it.'

Mirabel grabbed Brenda's coat and pulled her towards her until they were face to face. She hissed with fury and malice. 'Have you any idea what will happen to that sister of yours if you welches on me?'

By way of reply Brenda took a letter from her pocket and handed it to Mirabel, who read it with growing consternation.

'A police officer gave me that yesterday,' said Brenda flatly. She plucked the letter back from Mirabel's unresisting fingers and read it out loud.

*Dearest Brenda,*

*I am so sorry. I've tried to make a new life. I really have. But I'm just not brave enough to face another day. You've always been the strong one – please take care of my Josie and tell her, when she is older, that I wish I could have been a proper mother to her. Tell her I loved her more than anyone else in the world and that I am so sorry not to see her grow up...*

Brenda stopped reading. 'She took an overdose and now she's dead.' The words caught in her throat.

Mirabel was thinking on her feet. 'Tragic. Very sorry for your loss and all that.' She drummed her fingers, trying to think. 'But what about your old man?' she demanded. 'Getting him better was part of the deal as well. Ain't you bothered about him?'

When she replied Brenda's voice was bitter. 'Of course I'm bothered about him. And do you know what? He *is* better than he was. More *compos mentis*, anyway. And the really cruel thing is that before, he didn't have a clue how confused he was. He was on his own little planet and he was perfectly happy there. Now he's just well enough to understand what's happening to his brain, *and* what's going to happen and it's depressed the hell out of him. So the sooner the treatment wears off, the better for everyone. Like I said. The deal's off.'

Mirabel shook her head. 'You just don't get it, do you? If Bella is with me, she's in danger.' She put her head on one side and looked at Brenda. 'Could you manage two lovely little babbies, maybe?'

Brenda shook her head. She didn't tell Mirabel that she had never been able to warm to Bella. In fact, it was worse than that. She felt waves of revulsion just thinking about her. She told herself over and over again that the little girl was just an innocent baby but it

made no difference. Perhaps it was guilt that prompted her to try and be helpful.

'I know one or two trustworthy foster parents who might help out... In fact one of them's looking after Bella now so I can sort out the funeral...'

Mirabel was silent. She weighed up the possibilities and came to a decision. 'This secret is meant to be as water-tight as a duck's bum. Just you and me. One more person who knows is one more possible blabbermouth. I think we'll play it my way. If you don't carry on looking after Bella, like we agreed, you'll never find out where Josie is.'

Brenda had anticipated that. 'And if you don't play it *my way*, your little secret won't be a secret any more. I seem to remember you telling me you don't want Titus or Lethe to know about our arrangement. I can understand that. They're despicable. Yet you seem to work with them happily enough. I don't pretend to understand why, but I know you don't want them to find her. Well, if I don't get my sister's baby back, safe and sound, the person looking after Bella will take her straight to them. And if anything bad happens to me, or mine; same thing.'

Mirabel hated to be outmanoeuvred. She glowered malevolently at Brenda. 'Think you're smart, don't you,' she said venomously.

Brenda shrugged. 'Not really. I just want what's mine.' *And I don't want Bella*, she thought.

There was a long silence as the two women glared at each other. They both wanted to get the upper hand and give as little ground as possible.

There was the sound of a key turning in the lock. As the door opened, Titus called out, 'I got your message, dearest. What's the trouble? Oh.' He had spotted Brenda. He was surprised to see her in Mirabel's kitchen. Then he noticed someone sleeping behind the bamboo screen. 'Who's that?' he demanded after giving Mirabel an affectionate peck on the cheek.

'It's our Darren,' said Mirabel hastily. 'He's having a little kip. Not feeling so good. Best not disturb him.'

'OK. So what's wrong?'



'I think he's a bit hung-over...'

'I meant, what's wrong with you, dearest?'

Mirabel was temporarily stumped. 'Me? Oh. Oh yes. The phone's not working...' she improvised. 'I heard some rowdies outside, and I got scared. I wanted to ring you, and I couldn't.'

Titus picked up the receiver, then went outside. He was back almost immediately. 'Someone's cut the wire,' he said grimly. 'I'll get a man onto it as soon as possible. In the meanwhile, how about some elevenses for me and Brenda? We can have a nice little chat. We haven't had a little chat for ages, have we, Brenda?'

Brenda smiled at him. 'Not since we met in America,' she said. 'Time we caught up.'

Mirabel moved to the far end of the kitchen and heard them talking. As she brewed tea, buttered buns and sliced cakes she strained to hear what was being said. She was puzzled. *She said he was despicable. Now she's all matey. What's going on?*

'So did you get to see Burlington?' asked Matthew.

'No, but Smokey did. And Beth. They told me all about it, though.' She remembered the glimpses she had seen, trying not to recall the bed in the sickbay. 'They saw the telephone exchange, with the blue and white tiled floor. Smokey's convinced the phones still work. Oh — and there were some amazing murals in the canteen! There's a circus scene with a strong man... painted by a woman with a Russian-sounding name...'

'Olga Lehmann,' smiled Matthew. 'She worked with a chap called Gilbert White, as I recall. They were commissioned to cheer up the people working underground when it was an aircraft factory during World War Two. One was rather controversial — a missionary in a cooking pot, surrounded by cannibals! There were nearly eighty wall-paintings - prehistoric monsters, sailors and mermaids, all kinds of sports. And *Alice in Wonderland*. Amazing.'

'I wish I'd seen them,' said Jo wistfully. 'There just wasn't enough time.'

'I'm afraid most of them will be long gone,' said Matthew. 'A great shame.' He sounded sad, then cheered up as he added, 'I have a book about Olga at home. Remind me to show it to you when they finally let me out of here!'

'I'll look forward to that,' said Jo. Shortly afterwards she ended the call and thought ahead to her meeting with Smokey. She tried to blank out seeing him and Beth together in Burlington, but without success.



Titus had no idea how it came about that Brenda confided in him. He was aware that under normal circumstances, when they were not together, she bad-mouthed him to all and sundry. But in his company she told him all manner of secrets about the plans the Righteous were hatching. He had a stock question which, he had learned, seemed to open the floodgates.

'So how are things with the Righteous these days?'

Brenda launched into a rundown of the on-going investigations into the Glory Foundation. The words just tripped off her tongue and Titus listened carefully.

Mirabel wheeled her Hostess trolley in just as Brenda mentioned Smokey. She clammed up when Mirabel joined them. She whispered something in Titus's ear.

For a moment Titus looked furious, then he composed himself. 'Thank you, Brenda,' he said. 'That is very useful. I have a real interest in Smokey's well-being.'

Watching Brenda being so chummy and chatty with Titus gave Mirabel the glimmer of an idea. She knew Brenda would never tell her where Bella was, unless Mirabel produced her niece, but it seemed as if she might tell Titus. Then Brenda wouldn't have the edge she thought she had and might have to reconsider her position.

She drew Titus to one side, safe in the certainty he didn't know that Brenda was Bella's guardian. 'Brenda's

came round 'cos she heard a rumour that Lucy didn't die. She's supposed to have had a baby and some woman round here's claiming to be looking after it. Why don't you get her to tell you all about it while I tops up the tea-pot?" She privately thought that was pretty ingenious for a rush job.

Titus looked worried. 'But Mirabel! What if Brenda inadvertently revealed Bella's whereabouts to me? You know we agreed it is best if I don't know where she is. Wait till I've gone and ask her yourself and then we'll work out what to do.'

Mirabel could have throttled him.

Meanwhile Brenda had thought of a way to press home her advantage. She might have been in thrall to Titus, but she was still desperate to find where Mirabel had hidden Josie, and that desperation inspired her to great cunning. She tried a long shot.

'Titus,' she said sadly, 'I just heard that my poor sister has killed herself. She lived in Singapore and she had a little daughter. I'm going to try and formally adopt her, but I need to arrange for her to be cared for until I can get over there and sort everything out. Is there anywhere you could recommend?'

Titus patted Brenda's hand. 'Of course, my dear. I am sorry you have so much to bear. I will help in any way I can. The Glory Foundation runs an excellent orphanage in Singapore, don't we, Mirabel?'

Mirabel's face was a study in suppressed panic. 'I don't think that's the kind of place Brenda has in mind,' she said.

Brenda looked at Mirabel and smiled a victorious, cat-like smile, saying, 'I am sure if Titus recommends it, it would be perfect.'

'Thank you, Brenda. It is nice to be appreciated.' Titus looked pointedly at Mirabel. 'As I was saying, *The Little Sisters of Saint Ivo* would be honoured to care for your niece at this sad time. Saint Ivo of Kermartin, like Saint Jerome Emiliani after him, had a particular care for abandoned children. I will be more than happy to assist you in making your arrangements.'

Brenda was already on her feet and halfway to the door. 'Thank you, Titus,' she smiled. 'I'll let you know if I need any more help. You have been so supportive! Mirabel, I will be in touch.'

After she had gone, Mirabel seethed as Titus held forth on the benefits of compassion. When she could bear no more she interrupted him.

'Oh, give over, Titus. We're in a bloody awful mess and it will take more than the milk of human kindness to sort it out.' So saying she poured herself a stiff gin.

Titus was all concern. 'Tell me, my dearest,  
So Mirabel told him.

## Chapter Sixteen – Lazy Sunday afternoon

Smokey was waiting impatiently. 'Thought you'd never get here,' he grumbled.

'I'm two minutes early!' protested Jo indignantly. 'How come you're in such a rush?'

'Just keen to get going,' he mumbled. 'It sounds really interesting.'

They checked that no-one was around, got past the security and went into room 317. Once inside the wardrobe Jo searched for the hook that would activate the descent.

'Don't you like lifts?' asked Jo. 'Only you seem really tense. What's up?'

'I'm alright. Don't fuss,' he muttered.

Wordlessly, Jo took two violet tabards from the dozens hanging up and handed him one.

They reached the ground and walked out into the tunnel. Several electric trolleys were parked there, and Smokey studied them with interest,

'We don't need a trolley,' said Jo. 'It's not far.'

'Are those fossils?' asked Smokey studying the clay walls.

'Yes – and bones, skeletons of birds and fish. This is the way to the laboratory,' said Jo. 'We'll go there in a bit. But first I want to show you something.' She walked a little further down the tunnel, searching for the starfish by the peep-hole which had revealed the ossuary. When she found it she peered in again, taking in the macabre details of the carefully arranged bones.

'Come and have a look at this!' she called. She marvelled again at the intricacy of the panel of Saint Lazarus. 'Come on, Smokey! Smokey?'

But Smokey had vanished. So had one of the electric trolleys.

'Smokey, don't fool about. We haven't got much time before I'm supposed to meet my mum...'

Silence. Jo tried emping him.

***Are you alright? Is there some sort of problem and you can't call out?***

Nothing. Jo tried another tack.

***I know you hate me doing this, and I'm not crazy about it either, but if you're in danger I need to know.***

With that she tried to concentrate on seeing with Smokey's eyes. She had a brief glimpse of another part of the tunnel, then his hand was visible before he covered his eyes and she could see nothing.

***Sorry, Jo. I'm alright. Don't worry about me and don't try to follow me. I'm not in danger. I just needed to get down here. I can't tell you why. Not yet, anyway.***

Realisation came swiftly, followed closely by bitterness and anger.

***You used me!***

***Like I said. Sorry.***

Jo was devastated. How could he? Why couldn't he tell her? And where was he going?



Titus had not been to the laboratory for a long time. He admired the pioneering work that was made possible by the skill of Lethe and her team and the wonderful people who left their bodies to medical science. He just preferred not to spend too much time surrounded by cadavers and body parts.

He had a terrible task to perform, and it needed to be done without delay. A heavy burden lay on his soul, but he would not shirk his duty. His lips moved in prayer as he went about his grim work.

He opened a door labelled *John and Jane Doe*. Still praying fervently, he entered the room, avoiding looking into the dead eyes of the bodies stored there – bodies with no name and no apparent connection with another living soul. He tried not to think about the stories that had brought these people to such a lonely end, and concentrated instead on preparing Darren's corpse for its final resting place.

The cold air began to affect his breathing. He had very little time before he needed to be somewhere else entirely but he forced himself to work methodically. His hands shook as he filled in the necessary paperwork,

which he filed along with a beautifully forged letter of release purporting to be from the police morgue.

With one final prayer and a pledge to protect Lucy and her baby, Titus said farewell to his grandson.



'How's my favourite pupil?' Matthew smiled as Ali came in with a tin of home-made cakes. 'I wasn't expecting you for a while. You've just missed Jo.'

'Paul dropped me off. He drives faster than I do! He's meeting someone at the Museum. Trying to get Summer Moon's ancestors' bones sent home. Of course, they're his ancestors as well. So here I am. And where is my lovely daughter?'

'She's off exploring with Smokey. He wanted to see the ossuary, and the laboratory...'

Matthew tailed off, realising from Ali's blank expression that she had no idea what he was talking about.

He ploughed on with an explanation which he could tell was not going down at all well. When he had finished Ali looked furious.

'Honestly, Matthew! Why didn't you tell me about this before?'

'I thought Jo might have mentioned it,' mumbled Matthew, beginning to feel wretched.

Ali gave a short, sardonic laugh. 'As if. She tells me nothing. She treats it all like one big adventure...'

Matthew risked an interruption. 'Just like you did when you were younger.'

Ali gave him a freezing glance. 'Not when I was thirteen, I didn't.'



Jo felt completely torn. Should she follow Smokey? He clearly didn't want her to and anyway, right now she was so mad at being used she didn't much care what happened to him. She could manage perfectly well without him. Feeling utterly dispirited, she thought she might just as well go back and meet her mother.

She set off back down the tunnel, then froze as she heard footsteps coming towards her. She flattened

herself into the shadows behind a pillar. Two orderlies, dressed in violet uniforms, passed within a whisker of her, chatting animatedly as they went towards the lift.

Once they were gone Jo breathed again, only to freeze once more as she heard the lift arrive and one of the orderlies greet the woman who had just descended.

'Good afternoon, Madame Lacuna!'

Jo felt a shudder run through her. Aunt Lethe. The last person she wanted to meet. She risked a peep. Sweeping towards her down the tunnel was a familiar green-robed, masked figure.

*Something's not right,* thought Jo. *Why isn't my scar itching?*

The answer came soon enough.

***Jo! Where the hell are you?***

***Mum? Is that you?*** Jo felt light-headed with relief.

***Damn right it is. Now come out from wherever you are lurking and tell me what is going on!***

Jo stepped sheepishly out of the shadows. 'Hello, Mum,' she said.

'I'll give you *Hello*,' said Ali grimly.

'Sorry, Mum.'

'I should think so. I'm sick to the back teeth of being treated as if I don't exist, Jo.'

'I'm so sorry, Mum.' Jo was genuinely contrite.

'So you should be. I don't expect to hear about your adventures from other people.'

'Did Matthew tell you?'

'Yes. He didn't realise you hadn't.'

Silence fell. Ali left Jo to wrestle with some very uncomfortable feelings.

Eventually Jo spoke. 'It wasn't his fault, Mum. I hope you didn't give him a hard time.'

'He'll get over it. So tell me what you are doing down here. And where's Smokey? Matthew said he was with you.'

'He was,' said Jo glumly. 'But he vanished.'

'Did he indeed.'



Jo had a distinct feeling that Smokey had just made his way to the top of Ali's hit list. 'I was going to show him this amazing ossuary – that's a place where human bones are stored...'

'Thank you. I do know the word,' said Ali testily. She was not giving any quarter.

Jo carried on gamely. 'Matthew says the ossuary would have been part of the old leper colony that used to be here. Further on there's a horrible laboratory, full of dead bodies and bits of bodies. He says it's for the transplant operations, but it's really gruesome. I was wondering if there's a way into the ossuary from the laboratory – I've only seen it through a peephole.'

'All very fine, but how did you get here in the first place?'

'That was an accident,' answered Jo. 'I was hiding from Aunt Lethe and discovered the lift. Once I was down here I realised it all tied in with the treasure hunt in *Scorpion Grass*. Only...'

'Only what?'

'Well, Morten and I have finished the treasure hunt, but I think Everard Burnley added something extra to the puzzle, just for me. There's a key... and this torch. It's ultraviolet and makes some things luminous, like invisible ink. Matthew thinks it might reveal some direction signs.' Jo shone the torch at the wall, then recoiled in horror. 'Ugh! What's that? It looks like a human finger!'

In the ultra-violet light of the torch a luminous smear highlighted three slender bones glimmering eerily, pointing further down the tunnel.

'I think this gives new meaning to the word fingerpost,' said Ali. 'Better see where it leads. Come on!'

Jo couldn't quite believe her ears. She couldn't see her mother's face, but from the tone of her voice she could have sworn Ali was smiling.

'Well, after going to all the bother of dressing up and getting past the security with the family DNA we might as well take advantage of my hideous disguise and have a good look round.'

There were other finger bones set into the wall. They had obviously been there for centuries, almost indiscernible amongst the other fossils unless you knew to look for them. More recently someone, presumably Everard Burnley, had marked them with some kind of invisible ink. The ghostly trail of finger bones led Ali and Jo further down the tunnel in the direction of the laboratory.



Lethe Lacuna hummed to herself as her elegant purple limousine sped away from the Midlands.

The new driver, Carl, was excellent but she had expected Sebastian. 'I heard he had a heart attack, Madame,' Carl had said and she was rather surprised that she had not been informed of this before. 'Is he making a good recovery?' she asked, and was vexed that Carl knew nothing more and she would need to make further enquiries. Nevertheless, the ride was smooth and relaxing. All in all, her plans were going very well. She leaned back and drank a glass of chilled white wine.

So many things were moving along just as she intended. First, she had Matthew Jameson in the palm of her hand. Either his healing abilities would return, or he would persuade Jo to use hers to reverse the terrible scarring Lethe kept hidden behind hospital masks and heavy veils. Either way, she fully expected her beauty to be restored. Not only that, she was quietly confident that any reduction in his powers was merely temporary. She liked him to think it was her doing that he could no longer emp, but her research indicated that his skills would return in full and then he would be a formidable, albeit reluctant, ally. The fact that he was so looking forward to being married to that hideous old has-been Mary Montgomery was a complete mystery, but it was a mystery that motivated him to stay alive. And to do that, he would need to maintain favour with Lethe as she had complete control over his artificial heart.

As for the ridiculous nonsense with Titus thinking Lucy's baby might be the Child of Glory, well, soon that ghastly boy Darren would ferret out where Mirabel and Titus were hiding the wretched child and she would have a very useful pawn in her power struggles with Titus. And if that old crone Mirabel had an unfortunate accident at the over-zealous hands of Darren, well, no loss there. Lately she was exerting far too much influence over Titus.

It was only a matter of time before Lethe discovered exactly how Mirabel managed – seemingly indefinitely – to prolong Titus's life and, once Lethe knew the secret, several delicious options would open up. Mirabel would become completely disposable, and Titus would have to be very co-operative indeed or Lethe could simply snuff him out. As Titus believed it was necessary for him to live forever to guide the Child of Glory and fulfil the stupid prophecy, Lethe would have the power to bend him to her considerable will. And the possibility that she could somehow adapt Mirabel's formula to herself and stay eternally youthful was never far from her thoughts.

Then there was Zebo. Now that was just plain serendipity. Who better than an undertaker's assistant to ensure a steady flow of cadavers for her invaluable research? He would be bribed by such pitifully small amounts of money, and think himself crafty and cunning as he demanded more and more, not realising just how fabulously wealthy she, and the Glory Foundation, were. And when he had outlived his usefulness, well, Darren would probably enjoy disposing of him.

A small frown furrowed her brow at the next item on her list. Smokey. Had she paid too high a price to secure his co-operation? Reuniting his family was all very well – a dramatic gesture and a satisfying reminder of her great power - but the loss of Bridget's unquestioning obedience was irksome. Although, in all honesty, sometimes Bridget's unquestioning obedience had in itself been irksome. Sycophants were all very

well, but rather tedious at times. Time to concentrate on Beth, perhaps, with her great talent for duplicity.

Yes, the price had been high, but it was essential to her plotting that Smokey was under her control. She had seen how Titus had become attached to the repulsive boy, and the attachment made Titus vulnerable. That vulnerability would weaken Titus when the time came to depose him.

Lethe reminded herself that she had yet to erase some of Smokey's more incriminating memories – she should make that a priority. In fact, rather than return home she would go straight to the hospital and set to work. She was confident that Smokey would resist her, but she knew that ultimately, she had the upper hand. Restoring his mother's memory had been inspired. He could have resisted anything else she had to offer.

Lethe directed Carl to drive to Glory Heights, and was in high good humour as she stepped out of the car. She noticed a couple of uniformed members of the lower orders staring at her, and she called out an uncharacteristically cheery 'Good afternoon!' to them.

One of them appeared to be stammering something incoherent. Normally Lethe would have considered the ramblings of a minion as beneath contempt, and swept past without a thought, but all in all, things were shaping up nicely; her plans were unfolding exactly as intended and for the first time since becoming so horrifically mutilated, she was actually feeling positive, if not happy. Her good mood led her to stop and listen to the burbling.

'Madame Lacuna!' gasped the orderly. 'I don't understand – we saw you going into the tunnel only moments ago... yet here you are! It's impossible!'

Lethe's self-satisfaction evaporated instantly. 'What absolute rubbish! Don't waste my valuable time,' she snapped, her mind working quickly. Within seconds a most unwelcome explanation came to her, and she set off at a run.



The tunnel came to a dead end. 'This is the laboratory,' said Jo. She couldn't bear to look at the dead bodies hanging in rows.

Her mother was made of sterner stuff. She stared through the window at the lines of corpses and body parts, all bathed in the strange silvery blue light. 'It must be a freezer,' she breathed. 'Astonishing!'

Jo shivered. 'You're as bad as Matthew! He went all philosophical on me when I told him about this place.'

Jo's words tailed off as she realised her mother was very hurt. There was a long pause, then Ali spoke slowly. 'Jo, as you grow older you are entitled to more and more privacy. I don't own you and there is nothing that says being a mother entitles me to know everything my child does and thinks. Part of being an adolescent is about separating, and I try to be prepared for that. But there is something so special about being needed. That's hard to give up.'

Jo did not know what to say. In her heart of hearts she had been expecting, and dreading, this conversation for a long time. It hadn't been much fun, just now, when Ali was cross, but now she was hurt and that was far harder to bear.

Ali continued, struggling to find the words to express what she wanted to say. 'I want to protect you from all the awful things there are in the world, Jo, but I know it is better for you that I help you be strong enough to manage without me. If I become redundant I will have been a good enough mother. Already you are brave and true, and kind. I see you growing more powerful every day – more independent and head-strong. And I'm scared, but I know I have to believe in you and trust you to make your way in the world.'

Jo's mouth was dry. She wanted to tell her mother how much she loved her, but the words wouldn't come.

'It hurts that you confided in Matthew and not me. People who love each other have the power to hurt each other. And I hurt my mother. I did not always confide in her. She was very strict, and when I was your age, I resented it. I never wanted to be like her, but I realise that she must have felt a lot like I do now.'

So, dear daughter of my heart, things are going to change. Very soon you and I are going to work out some reasonable rules for the next few years – rules about courtesy, safety, responsibility and respect.'

Jo nodded, still not trusting herself to speak.

Ali's tone became brisk. 'I would dearly love to go and have a look in that filing cabinet. My sister has always kept meticulous notes. I am sure they would make fascinating reading.'

'The door is locked,' said Jo, able to speak at last. 'I wonder...' She reached into her pocket for the silver key Reg had made from the clay mould. 'This came from Everard Burnley. I think there is something down here he wants me to know about. Nothing to do with the treasure hunt. Something mysterious.' So saying she tried to open the door, but it was immediately obvious that the key did not fit.

Ali saw Jo's disappointment. She looked carefully at the key. 'This is a very ancient design,' she observed. 'It's probably from the old leper hospital. I bet it will get us into the ossuary. All we need is a keyhole!'

Jo shone her torch into the shadows behind the pillars, then switched on the ultraviolet light.

She gasped. Just ahead of where they were standing, more luminous phalanges pointed the way. Softly glowing in the darkness beyond, a pentagon began to glimmer. Jo ran to look.

'There's nothing here,' she said, disappointed. 'Just a mark on the tunnel wall.'

Ali joined her and studied the pentagon carefully. 'There's a small indentation at each point,' she said. 'I wonder...' She carefully placed her fingers and thumb on the indentations and gently pushed. Silently a section of the nearby wall began to move, and a narrow passageway was revealed.

'Oh, wow,' breathed Ali. They set off down the corridor, only to reach another dead end. Jo shone the torch again, and saw that the dead end was, in fact, an ancient oak door, intricately carved with a gallant knight and, next to him, a skeleton holding the same

sword, wearing the same tabard - a stark reflection of death and the grave. An inscription over the door read:

*As now you live, so once did we;  
We have become what you will be...*

A thin, brass pentagon outlined a keyhole and this time Jo was confident her key would fit. She expected the door to creak, cobwebs to cling to them, and the air to be stale with the dust of centuries. Instead the door opened easily and silently, and there were no cobwebs or dust.

## Chapter Seventeen – Making the Break

Smokey travelled resolutely on towards the freedom he so longed for. He felt wretched about using Jo to get down into the tunnel, but he hadn't had any other choice. He had to be in a specific place at a specific time, and for that, he needed Jo. It was vital that no-one knew the plans he had made with Reg to free his family from the power of Lethe Lacuna once and for all. It wasn't that he distrusted Jo - she had travelled halfway around the world to rescue him, after all - but he couldn't risk her telling anyone. The moment he had seen his mother again, loving and kind as she always used to be, he had determined to take her and Bridget as far away from their old life as possible.

When first he heard of the tunnel under Glory Heights, Smokey knew straight away that here was his best chance of escape from the semi-prison of the hospital and the ever-watchful eyes of Beth. Then a strange thing happened. His desire to leave the hospital diminished as Titus plied him with ever-more generous gifts. With alarming speed he grew used to a life of luxury, becoming apathetic and withdrawn. When his sister and mother were restored to him, however, his complacency was jolted and his hunger for freedom returned. Lethe Lacuna had actually done him a favour!

Smokey knew he could leave whenever he wanted using his new powers of invisibility, but to use the power for any length of time exhausted him and right now, with so much at stake, he needed all the strength he could muster. He thought about confiding in Beth and travelling with her, but her connection to Lethe held him back. In the end he decided Beth could not be trusted. She would have wanted him to stay with her.

He knew many of the street children who lived in disused Underground stations during the Riots, and had an extensive knowledge of the network of tunnels under London. Since hearing of the catacombs, he had lain in wait, invisible, for members of staff to use the



hidden elevator, and travelled with them whenever he could, exploring the tunnel network.

On his last visit, he had stumbled upon a series of disgustingly graphic murals, all beautifully depicting acts of sadism and agony. He had recognised the work immediately as that of Wheezy and, while there was no sign of the Feral child, Smokey was now confident that the tunnels would lead him to others that were familiar to him.

The only difficulty had been finding a place to meet Reg and the other members of the Righteous who would take his family to safety. Then a great stroke of luck had come his way and an ideal rendezvous presented itself. When Smokey was in Corsham he had found a public phone and called Reg with the final arrangements. He'd told Beth he was ringing his mother.

Smokey didn't want to think about Beth. He wondered what she would do when she found out he was gone. He felt sad about leaving her behind, with her passionate kisses and her willing body, but the happiness he felt on regaining his family and soon his freedom was stronger than his desires and regrets.

He knew full well that Titus and Lethe would try, for reasons he did not attempt to understand, to track him down. Hopefully they would not discover his absence until the next morning, by which time he would be a long way from London.

The trolley sputtered to a halt. It had run out of charge. He would have to continue on foot.

He wondered if he would ever see Beth or Jo again. Once he was safely away he might risk emping both of them, but until then he stayed dark, just in case Lethe, Titus, or one of their minions tuned in.

Smokey was heading for the disused British Museum Underground station in Bury Place. It had closed in 1933 but it was familiar to him nonetheless. When he had visited the Atlantis bookshop with Beth and Jo, the owner Geraldine had whisked him away for a quick tour. She had told him that some people believed the place was haunted by the ghost of an

Ancient Egyptian Pharaoh called Amen-Ra. She said a newspaper offered a reward to anyone who would spend the night there, but there were no takers.

Geraldine had proudly shown him an original movie poster from 1935 for the film *Bulldog Jack*. She had gleefully told him how one scene in the film included a secret tunnel from the station to the Egyptian room at the Museum, building on the myth of the haunted station. On the night the film was released, two women, waiting on the platform at nearby Holborn, vanished, never to be seen again. Strange marks were discovered on the walls of the closed station and terrible moans were heard.

Suddenly Smokey wished he hadn't started that particular train of thought. He had no desire to come face to face with Amen-Ra, or anyone else for that matter.

The more Smokey tried not to think about the ghost, the more powerful the thoughts became. *Think about something else*, he told himself sternly. But by then he remembered a late-night film he had watched during his recuperation called *Death Line*, in which a community of cannibals descended from Victorian railway workers preyed on hapless travellers.

Smokey broke into a run. He could hear the rumble of trains running on the Central Line. He knew he was almost there when he squeezed through a metal grille and narrowly avoided falling into a sewer. Gingerly he hugged the wall as he made his way along the stinking passage.

He tried a couple of side tunnels, shining his torch in the gloom and looking upwards until he saw what he was searching for.

'We painted it for a joke,' Geraldine had told him as she lifted the trapdoor in the basement of the Atlantis Bookshop. 'Well, it's certainly worked. Amen-Ra has never paid us a visit.'

Above Smokey the Eye of Horus, outlined in luminous paint, marked his destination. 'It is a powerful symbol of healing and protection,' Geraldine had said.

Smokey hauled lumps of fallen masonry, sections of railway sleepers and other rubble until he could clamber high enough off the ground to reach the trapdoor. He tried to be as quiet as possible, dragging the heaviest items when the rumble of nearby trains drowned out much of the noise, but even so he was glad that it was a Sunday and all the shops above were closed.

At last his makeshift tower was high enough and he was able to push open the trapdoor and climb into the bookshop basement. He lay on the floor, winded, for a few minutes, catching his breath, then rose to his feet.

To the unmistakable click of a Luger.



Ali moved into the bone room with Jo close on her heels. They stared around them at the serried rows of skulls with wonder and horror combined.

'Look at the altar,' breathed Ali. 'Have you ever seen anything so chilling?' Jo saw four small skeletons, presumably once children, supporting the corners of a large stone slab. On the altar candle holders had been carved from thigh bones, then polished to a pearl-like sheen. There were chalices made from skulls embedded with rubies and altar boxes decorated with thin, almost transparent slices of bone.

Intricate chandeliers made from pelvic bones and ribs hung from the vaulted ceiling – each one delicate, almost lace-like. Rows of skulls followed the curves of the trusses supporting the roof. On the ends of the trusses, on the corbels were angelic musicians made, fittingly, from the smallest bones, the stirrup bones from the middle ear.

Ali was just about to explain the joke when Jo's hand began to itch unbearably. She tried to stammer out a warning but Lethe was already standing in the doorway, her pearl-handled revolver aimed directly at Ali.

Time seemed to slow. Jo watched helplessly as Lethe squeezed the trigger. A single shot rang out. Jo heard Ali gasp beside her. She turned, feeling as if she

were wading through treacle, in time to see her mother drop to the ground.

Jo tried to reach her, but Lethe moved like lightning. With one hand she grabbed Jo's scarred hand and held it in a grip of iron. With the other hand she ripped off her veil.

Her awful scars were livid in the gloom of the ossuary, made all the worse by Lethe's sneer of contempt. 'You did this,' she hissed. 'Now you will make amends.'

A terrible struggle began. As Lethe used their blood-bond to drain Jo's strength and power to heal, her scars slowly started to fade.

Jo fought back valiantly, knowing full well that if she lost the fight Lethe would have no mercy. She remembered how she had managed to hurt Sebastian long ago. Jo visualised a metal band around Lethe's head and, with a thought, tightened it. It repulsed her to harm another human being, but she could not afford pity with such a ruthless opponent. Lethe cried out and raised both hands to her temples, releasing Jo. Immediately her strength flowed back.

She straddled her aunt as she lay winded, and punched and pummelled Lethe's face, trying to knock her out so she could run for help, trying to blot out the sight of the hideous scars.

Lethe fought back like a tiger, biting, clawing, drawing blood, all the time trying to seize Jo's scarred hand.

In the frenzy, Lethe lost one of her expensive stiletto heels. Jo's fingers managed to clutch at the fallen shoe. Half-crazed with fury, she raised it above her head with both hands, intent on driving it down into Lethe's ruined face. She was gratified to see a look of panic in her aunt's emerald eyes but right then Ali cried out in pain, and for a vital second, Jo lost concentration as she looked at her mother.

In a moment Lethe was on her feet, dragging Jo along the ground by both hands. Jo began to feel light-headed as Lethe remorselessly stole her strength. The tide had turned; her sole opportunity had been lost and

now Jo would pay the price. Lethe gripped Jo's wrist and with a look of twisted satisfaction, sank her teeth deep into Jo's scarred hand, instantly drawing blood. Jo was close to fainting, powerless to resist, only able to watch through dimming eyes as Lethe grew stronger and more beautiful. Then all Jo's strength was gone and she fell into darkness.



'Don't move.'

From the shadows came the familiar voice of Titus Stigmurus, although the familial concern and apologetic tones of late were gone. Instead there was only calm fury. Smokey did as he was told.

'Why, Jacob? Have I not done everything I possibly can to make amends? How can you betray me like this?'

Smokey did not reply. He cautiously surveyed the room he was now trapped in. The basement for the Atlantis bookshop was piled high with dusty treasures. Teetering piles of books stood taller than a man; rugs were rolled up and stacked in corners. Battered furniture and cardboard boxes lined the walls, each overflowing with papers. There was barely an inch of visible flooring left. A single high window was encased in grime and cobwebs, but still enough light filtered through to illuminate the scene. All of this detail was irrelevant to Smokey, however, for his eyes had settled on Reg and Geraldine.

They were lashed together, seated back to back. They were bound, gagged and from the looks of things, unconscious. Reg in particular looked in a bad way; he was slumped drunkenly, with blood pouring from a gash in his forehead. Titus continued.

'I've treated you like a son, Jacob. I've tended to you and provided for you, I've watched you and supported you and cared for you and still it is not enough. Your ingratitude astounds me.' He sounded genuinely pained.

Still Smokey said nothing. He was formulating a plan. All he needed was a distraction, a moment where

he could turn invisible and turn the tables on Titus. But he wasn't fast enough to dodge a bullet and as no distractions appeared forthcoming, he would have to make one of his own. He would have to make Titus angry, so he opted to tell him the truth.

'You'll never make amends, Stigmurus. No matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, you'll always be damned. You have an evil streak in you blacker than midnight.'

Titus's face drew tight, it was evident that Smokey had hit him right where it hurt; the fear that his sins were beyond atonement. He pressed on. 'Do you really think you're fooling anyone with your newfound compassion? You're only fooling yourself. Everyone knows you for what you are; a bitter, twisted megalomaniac with delusions of grandeur. You're a joke.'

Smokey could see the rage building by the second. He lowered his voice to a whisper.

'Nobody could ever love you. You'll die alone and nobody will care, the world will be better off without you. You're a tyrant and a bastard and I hate you.' And with that, Smokey spat in his face.

For the briefest of moments Titus was taken aback, he raised his free hand to wipe his face and in that moment, Smokey vanished.

'Very clever, young man. Very nicely done. You have quite a talent for duplicity. It must be hereditary.' Titus carefully moved across the room, inching his way closer to Reg and Geraldine.

'But then, you never knew your father, did you? Would it surprise you to learn that your mother and I were once close? She was one of VergissMeinNicht's keenest proponents. When the in-vitro fertilisation project was announced she was the very first to sign up for Lethe's experiments. Have you never wondered why we've kept such a close eye on you?'

Behind him, a heavy beam of wood lifted itself silently.

'Of course, what we really wanted was a girl. Still, your mother did her duty and raised you but it wasn't

until Bridget was born that the problems started. It's perfectly understandable, but she grew protective of her child. We tolerated it for as long as we could but when the time came for Bridget to be inducted, your mother became most unreasonable. Luckily Lethe has always had a way with people.'

Titus paused. 'You know, it's funny that she never showed any real interest in you. Although, having seen the way you've spurned my affections I can't say that I'm surprised. Looks like neither of us will ever know love, eh?'

With that the beam swung down towards his head. Titus lazily ducked and sidestepped and with a laugh grabbed Smokey by the arm. How could this be? Smokey was completely invisible! What was worse, where Titus's fingers gripped him he could feel a rapidly growing numbness.

'As I said, Jacob, I've been watching you.'

Paul arrived at Glory Heights bursting to tell Ali his news. He spotted her coming out of the main door and ran across the grass. He picked her up and twirled her round, laughing as he did so. 'The museum has agreed to send back the bones!' he exclaimed, then in an instant his smile faded and he let her go, moving swiftly away.

Lethe laughed. She looked particularly beautiful.

'Where's Ali?' he demanded.

Lethe shrugged. 'I think you are mistaking me for someone who cares,' she said flippantly.

Paul felt like hitting her and she knew it. She taunted him. 'I must say you were much quicker on the uptake this time, Paul. If only you had been so astute fourteen years ago.'

'You tricked me,' he said, his voice hollow. 'If I had realised it was you and not Ali...' His words hung in the air.

Lethe finished his sentence. 'We never would have made love? Oh, I am pretty sure it would have happened sooner or later, Paul. You don't want to want

me, but your desire runs deep and dark. As does mine.' She paused for maximum effect, then shocked him to the core of his being. 'I wonder if our son takes after you or me?'

**PROMO COPY**



## Chapter Eighteen – Memento Mori

The first thing Jo saw when she came round was the Angel of Death smiling down at her. Her blood turned to ice and she shook uncontrollably as she screamed in terror, desperately trying to crawl away from the grinning skeleton with sapphires for eyes, a golden hourglass and a silver scythe. In the gloom she bumped into something soft and gasped in horror as she realised it was a body. Jo heard a faint moan.

'Mum? As her eyes grew accustomed to the half-light, Jo could see her mother, slipping in and out of consciousness, deathly pale, a thin trickle of blood on her temple. 'Hold on! I'll get help!' And all the time the thought ran through her mind, over and over again. *Why didn't I tell her I love her when I had the chance?*

She realised they were still in the ossuary. The bones gleamed ivory, with quartz crystals embedded in all the ornamentation. Jo's heart sank when she saw the crystals. Something about their power negated hers. She tried empowering – Smokey, Beth, Matthew, Mary – anyone – but all she could feel was static. Her powers, normally so strong underground, weren't working here.

She ran to the door, but it was locked. She searched desperately for her key. Perhaps it had fallen out of her pocket in the struggle with Lethe? She patted herself down to be sure, only to discover that she had also lost the sprig of mugwort from her buttonhole.

Jo could see her torch lying on the ground. As she bent to pick it up she realised the intricate mosaic floor was made entirely of human teeth. Demons and angels danced an endless *danse macabre* of sin and atonement through the flames of hell and the fields of heaven.

Jo shone the torch as she searched for the key. At once the quartz crystals blazed with colour, dazzling her senses.

The key was nowhere to be found. Lethe had taken it. They were trapped.

Jo directed the ultraviolet beam at the walls. Nothing. She searched again, using the ordinary torchlight, sweeping the entire room from side to side and back again. There was no way out.

Jo was overwhelmed with dread. For the first time since she was a small child, she found herself praying to any deity that cared to listen. She sank to her knees in despair, and as she did so, dropped the torch from fingers weakened by fear. As it fell, the torchlight revealed a small brass pentagon right in the middle of the mosaic.

Jo made her way gingerly across the floor. She saw the five indentations at the points of the pentagon. She placed her fingers in them, pushed hard and carefully turned her hand. She heard the sound of stone on stone behind her and looked with wonder and relief as the wall bearing the image of Saint Lazarus slowly moved, revealing a room beyond the crypt.

'I'll be back as soon as I can,' Jo promised her mother; confident now she would find her way back to the tunnel, the lift and then the hospital. She covered Ali with a thick, heavy altar cloth and went into the hidden room.

Jo had thought the bone sculptures were nightmare enough. But this was far worse. The ossuary seemed peaceful by comparison to this hellish vision of fire and blood.

The floor gleamed red and the crimson walls, studded with red quartz, were decorated with gold and scarlet flames. In the middle of the floor was a sunken bath, tessellated with hundreds of blood-red tiles, punctuated with small gold coloured diamond-shaped tiles. Alongside was a huge table topped with a black marble slab. Aged and rusting surgical instruments were neatly placed on a shelf under the table – saws, scalpels, forceps, clamps and specula. A drainpipe ran from a hole in the marble slab to the sunken bath.

Jo shuddered convulsively as she realised what she was looking at. She remembered sitting alongside Matthew's hospital bed while he had read aloud on the subject.

*Lepers were considered halfway between life and death. Some called them the Firstborn of Death. All manner of strange methods have been tried to control leprosy. The venom of snakes was also used, and right up to the First World War, doses of bee stings (increasing up to four thousand) were administered. Sometimes they used scorpions and frogs instead of snakes. In the Middle Ages castration was tried.*

*Blood was considered to be a treatment either as a drink or as a bath. The blood of virgins or children was highly prized. This practice seems to have begun in Ancient Egypt and China and went on until the end of the eighteenth century; after that the blood of dogs or lambs was used instead. Some desperate victims tried blood from corpses.*

Images of pale bodies with open wounds crowded into Jo's mind. She tried to banish them but they were relentless. Everything in the room was dedicated to blood and death. Then she saw the painting.

An entire wall showed a cross-section of a gigantic, hollow, brass statue. There were seven sections and in one there was a sack of flour. In the second were turtle-doves, in the third a ewe, in the fourth a ram, in the fifth a calf, in the sixth an ox and in the seventh a child.

Steeling herself, trying not to look, Jo began a fingertip search across the painting, hoping she would find a sliding panel, a secret door. A plaque to one side told a terrible story, which she tried not to read. Despite herself, the words jumped out at her.

*Moloch, Prince of Hell, an ancient Ammonite god, delights in making mothers weep by stealing their children. His power is stronger in December...*

*...The Canaanites, Phoenician and related cultures in North Africa and the Levant worshipped Moloch. He was associated with child sacrifice...*

*...After a defeat in battle, Carthaginian nobles believed they had displeased Moloch by substituting low-born children for their own children. They tried to make amends by sacrificing two hundred children of the best families, and in their enthusiasm actually sacrificed three hundred children...*

*...There stands a bronze statue, its hands extended over a bronze brazier. When the flames fall upon the body, the limbs contract and the open mouth seems almost to be laughing until the contracted body slips quietly into the brazier. It was said the children died laughing...*

Jo grew desperate to find a way out. The blood-red room oppressed her, weighing her down with dread and fear. On the table was a child's drinking cup, made of gold and decorated with poppies. Feeling drawn to it, Jo reached out and touched the cup.

Instantly her head began to throb. She felt sick and dizzy as jagged flashes of light stabbed across her vision, dazzling her even when she closed her eyes. Clumsy with pain and terror, she lurched against the table, scattering the surgical implements with a clatter of metal that rang through her head like hammer blows.

Still clutching the cup, Jo pitched forward into darkness as she lost consciousness again.



'I don't want it. It tastes horrible.' Jora pushed the drink away. No amount of honey could hide the bitter taste. She was close to tears. She did not want Lolashon, the silent girl, the girl with no tongue. She wanted her mother.

How long had she been in this place, with all these other children and babies? Jora could not tell the difference between dream, thought and memory. Snatches of a quarrel drifted in and out of her mind. She tried to remember but her head ached.

Mother was crying. 'It is written. *Neither shall you give any of your offspring to offer them to Moloch.* This is not what God wants.'

Father had laughed but there was no joy in his laughter. 'Tell that to High Priest Ilimilku. He says that the children passed through the fire become immortal.'

'You don't believe that. He is a wicked liar.'

'Don't let anyone hear you say that. He has the power to crush us all. If we give him Jora, he will not demand my son.'

'You cannot be sure of that! They took your nephew. And the beggar children your brother reared hoping they would be taken instead.'

'I will not surrender my only son. We can make another daughter.'

Jora drifted.

Her mother's soft arms cradled her. Her hair smelt of wildflowers after the rain. But it was still raining.

A rough voice shouted at Jora's mother.

'Shut it, woman! It is forbidden to cry. Now hand her over.' Jora was torn from her mother's arms. She screamed and fought and kicked, but the guard just laughed.

Jora tried to remember her mother's face, but the memory was drifting and fading.

Lolashon tried again to get Jora to drink. Even without words, Jora knew what the older girl wanted to say.

***Please drink it, little Jora, little Autumn Rain.  
The guards will be here soon, and you should be asleep.***

Heavy footsteps were approaching. Lolashon looked terrified. She had been kind to the frightened little girl; now Jora was kind in return. She took a sip, screwing up her face at the acrid taste.

Lolashon offered her more, imploring with her soft brown eyes. Then the door burst open and two guards dragged Lolashon away. The golden cup clattered to the ground, spilling the sleeping draught. Jora could hear slaps and punches and cloth tearing. She screwed

her eyes tight shut, and covered her ears, but she could still hear the guard.

'Struggle all you like, slut. Even if you could scream, who'd hear you? Everyone's fast asleep.'

Jora pulled the pillow over her head to shut out his grunts. 'Like a pig,' she thought.

Then the other one hissed, 'Hurry up. It's my turn. I like a woman who can't complain and nag.'

At last, Jora slept. She dreamed of the High Priest's visit. All the children had been bathed and perfumed, then dressed in fine robes of white and gold. A cloth was spread with delicious food and drink, and the High Priest laughed loudly as he tickled the children and stuffed grapes into their mouths. Some of the children cried. Jora would not cry. The last thing her mother had said was. 'Be brave, my darling. I will always love you.' So she did not cry, even when High Priest Ilimilku prodded her with his bony fingers.

The next morning Jora took one look at Lolashon's poor, bruised face, and drank from the golden cup decorated with poppies without complaint. Soon she seemed to dissolve into soft darkness, allowing herself to be bathed and dressed. As if in a dream she took her place in a line with the other children, and they were led, blinking and stumbling, into the December dawn.

The cacophony of drums, flutes and trumpets was almost deafening. The musicians tried to drown out the cries of parents trying piteously to break past the guards to reach their children. Through a haze, Jora thought she saw her mother, but Lolashon pulled on her hand, and the line moved forward.

Ahead Moloch glowed gold against the morning sky. As the sun rose, framing the head of the gigantic god, the slaves at his feet sweated as they stoked the furnace.

As the poppies released their mercy and their magic, Lolashon led Jora to her place in front of the statue. A heat haze outlined the massive figure, which shimmered against the sky. Slowly the outstretched arms reached down, giant hands extended, palms

upwards, ready to hold the little girl in their warm embrace.

The drumming reached fever pitch as Jora stepped onto the giant bronze hand. She swayed as the mechanism began to rise. Below her, High Priest Ilimilku was leading the chant as the guards wrenched more children from the arms of their wailing mothers, including Jora's own brother.

The heat grew more intense with every moment. Jora heard the blood thumping in her ears as she raised her hands above her head. The sickly-sweet smell of roasting flesh filled the air. She felt her hair singe and curl. Lolashan looked away, her tears falling silently.

As the flames licked at her feet, Jora gazed upon the giant gleaming visage of Moloch before her. The fire caught and she was immediately engulfed. With her final breath she felt an ancient voice reverberate throughout her mind.

***Welcome to immortality. Your soul is now mine for eternity.***

Jo opened her eyes to the sound of her own screaming. All she could see was fire and blood; red and gold. She could still feel the flames rushing to welcome her; still hear the roar of their summons. In her confusion she had fallen into the sunken bath. As she tried to stand, bruised and shaky, she slipped and slithered on the shiny red tiles. Still reeling from her vision, weakened by pain, she feared she would be trapped there forever.

Panic gripped her as she scabbled at the sides of the tub. Dried blood was encrusted in the tiles, which got under her nails and into her hair. Jo sobbed as she slid back down to the floor, her torch falling from her pocket and clattering down beside her.

It took her a full minute to notice that the torch had switched itself on in the fall and that there, among the red tiles before her, a large luminous pentagon was

revealed. She depressed the five corners in turn, each yielding a satisfying click.

For a moment that felt like forever, nothing happened. Then, with a rumble that shook the entire room, the floor of the bath slowly and smoothly split into segments which in turn began to lower, forming a spiral staircase.

With her heart and torch both faltering, Jo trepidatiously began her long descent into the black.



Smokey could feel himself slipping away. 'It's often been remarked that I corrupt people,' Titus observed casually. 'It couldn't be further from the truth. All I do is enhance whatever powers people already have. Whatever capacity for darkness there is comes from within them. I merely help to set it free. You for example, have always hidden yourself away. You've practically made an art-form of it. All I'm doing is maximising your potential. You can't blame me for what's inside you. I wonder how much it will take for you to become completely lost?'

It was true, Smokey could no longer feel anything. Without his sense of self, without a body that could be seen or felt, all he had left was his mind. He felt the chasm of insanity yawning beneath him and then even that sensation grew faint.

'You could have been magnificent, Jacob, but you chose to be a nothing. We all make our own fate, and you have...' Titus never finished that sentence, for at that moment two fists like sledgehammers landed on the top of his head. He dropped both Smokey and the Luger and sprawled unconsciously on the floor. Reg stood in his place, silent and motionless.

'Well done, sir,' commented Geraldine, picking up the gun. 'He really was getting frightfully boring. I was afraid he might start talking to us next.'

She busied herself cutting away the last of the ropes that adorned the pair of them. Reg swayed when she touched the wound on his head.



'Don't mind me,' he grunted. 'Where's Smokey?' They both looked down at the floor around them, but there was only Titus.

With a smile Geraldine reached into one of her many pockets, drawing out a small leather drawstring bag. 'Hold out your hands, please,' she asked. Reg did so and Geraldine emptied out the contents.

'Herbs?' he muttered, nonplussed.

'Asafoetida,' said Geraldine.

'Bless you.'

'For protection.'

Then he understood. Carefully he sprinkled it around him, watching it settle.

'There,' said Geraldine, pointing to a place where the herbs had landed without touching the floor beneath. Reg traced the silhouette and before long, the inert form of Smokey was evident.

'I'll take it from here,' Geraldine said, crouching down and pulling out various bits and pieces from her pockets. 'Here is some Arnica for your head.' She waved a jar of ointment at Reg without looking up.

Reg had no better ideas so he took it. He unscrewed the lid and sniffed it suspiciously. Geraldine looked at him and rolled her eyes. Gingerly he applied a dollop to his cut, which began to feel better. He nodded his thanks.

'What do you want doing with this one?' he asked, prodding Titus with his boot, none too gently.

'Well, I don't want him here cluttering up the place,' she replied, all the while waving her hands over Smokey as she sprinkled various powders and intoned quiet blessings. 'And we can't take him out into the street. People will notice.'

Reg looked around the store room and slowly, a grin crept across his face. Geraldine watched as he hauled open the trapdoor to the tunnel beneath. Effortlessly he swept Titus over his shoulder and made his way to the hole. 'I ought to just drop you,' he growled. 'But I ain't like you.' He clambered down into the sewer and laid Titus down in a relatively dry spot.

As he hauled himself back up through the trapdoor, Reg swung his leg and with a mighty kick sent Smokey's makeshift ladder crashing to the floor. Once inside, he swung the trapdoor shut and looked around for the heaviest object he could find. His eyes settled on an antique mahogany dresser on the opposite side of the room and, with a fair amount of grunting and cursing, he laboriously began to slide it into place.

Geraldine and Smokey watched his progress, rapt with attention.

'Should I tell him there's a padlock?' asked Geraldine.

'Not yet,' replied Smokey, grinning. 'Wait for him to finish first.'



Jo stepped out into a pleasant, bright foyer painted a soft shade of *eau de nil*, with floor to ceiling curtains of aquamarine velvet. Luxurious plants grew on trellises, their abundant flowers exuding a gorgeous perfume. After the horror and darkness she had just experienced, the colour, light and beauty threatened to overwhelm her senses.

A single corridor led away from the room. Jo set off at a run, then stopped in her tracks as she realised the reason for the strange green-ish light coming in through the round windows that lined the passage way. The corridor was under the sea. Jo saw shadowy, sinuous shapes as fish and eels swam outside. She recognised trout and pike but there were others she had never seen before. She was sure she saw a colony of seahorses. Another time she would have longed to stay and look, but right now she was worried to death about Ali and hurried on.

She ran as fast as she could, desperately hoping that there would be people who could help her. At the end of the long corridor was a locked door. Picture windows on either side revealed a beautiful room, tastefully decorated and luxuriously furnished.

Jo could make out men and women moving about. There were nurses in violet uniforms and patients;

some in wheelchairs, others bed-ridden. It was obvious that the people she could see were terribly ill. If this was some kind of hospital ward, there had to be someone who could help.

Jo knocked and shouted with all her might, but no one seemed to hear her. In desperation she tried emping.

***Please help me! My mother has been shot! She needs a doctor!***



Smokey heard Jo's desperate cry for help but could not risk responding. His priority was to get his family away from Titus and the risk of being tracked would be far greater if he replied. He raised his shield instead.

Lethe Lacuna, not known for her skill with emping, nevertheless picked up the signal and laughed. It was a long time later when she realised that Jo must have moved away from the quartz crystal and by then it no longer mattered.

Titus Stigmurus heard Jo, and wondered where she was. He felt sad to hear about Ali, who once upon a time, when he hoped to marry Lethe, would have been his sister-in-law. Right now, however, he had to find his way out of these stinking sewers. He had wasted his valuable time chasing after that ingrate Smokey. He had an extensive network of spies so it was only a matter of time before Smokey would be found.

Mary Montgomery might have heard Jo, but she was asleep in front of the television, her exhaustion having finally caught up with her, and the message did not reach her.

Beth heard, but she had seen Smokey and Jo outside Matthew's room, and felt jealous and mean. Assuming they were together, she emp'd Smokey.

***Your new girlfriend seems to be in trouble. Just as well you're there to help her.***

Smokey did not reply to Beth, either.

***Jo kept trying. Smokey? Matthew? Beth? Mary? Mum's in the ossuary...***

Then came a most welcome and unexpected response. **Jo – I'll get help.**

Jo paused for a moment, hardly able to trust her senses. **Matthew? Is that really you?**

**Oh, Jo! Yes! It's me!**

Matthew Jameson wept as he realised his powers were returning. He turned to the visitor who had arrived half an hour before, worried about the whereabouts of his wife and daughter. A visitor who could not emp.

'Paul – Jo's in trouble. Ali's been shot. You'll need to make Lethe take you down to the tunnel. Ali is in the ossuary.'

Paul was out of the room before Matthew had finished talking.

**Jo, your dad is on his way. Tell me everything.**

## Chapter Nineteen – What Lies Beneath

Reg drove like a demon. He wanted to put as much distance as possible between Smokey's family and London. The incident at the Atlantis bookshop had rattled him far deeper than he had let on. Titus had known exactly where Smokey had agreed to meet him. And the implications of that were awful. Someone had betrayed them.

Reg forced himself away from thinking about betrayal. He was aware that an argument was going on behind him, between Smokey and his mother.

'But why do we have to leave London, Jacob?'

Smokey sighed. It had been one thing to persuade his mother and sister to meet up with him and Reg for what they thought was a visit to the Museum. But convincing them of the need to get away from Lethe was proving next to impossible. Lethe had ensured that their negative memories had been erased, leaving only positive thoughts about her.

Smokey had tried to tell them about being held prisoner by Lethe in *The Lost Fairground*. That had been a mistake.

'But you haven't been to America, Jacob! You've been here all the time! Are you running a temperature?' Smokey's mother was bewildered.

'She made you do terrible things, Bridget,' said Smokey, imploringly to his sister. 'As part of her research.'

It was no good. The more Smokey tried to tell them they were in peril, the more they listed examples of Lethe's kindness and generosity. Could Titus have been telling the truth about his mother's past? That didn't bear thinking about.

'I think we'd better get you to a doctor, dear,' said Mrs. Ashe, clearly worried for Smokey's sanity. 'Reg, please take us back straight away.'

Reg sighed and, without slowing down, looked at his passengers in the rear-view mirror.

'Smokey's right,' he said. 'You are all in terrible danger.' Smokey gave a sigh of relief, but it was short-

lived. Reg's next words made him gasp. 'But not from Lethe Lacuna.' Reg was thinking on his feet. Smokey stared at him in disbelief. 'I am under direct orders from her to take you all to a place of safety.'

'What kind of danger?' demanded Mrs. Ashe.

'She didn't go into details.' Reg was on a roll, now. 'But someone or something is creating these terrible delusions in Smokey's mind, infecting him, and possibly both of you, with false memories.'

By now Smokey had caught on to Reg's thinking, and played along. 'She's the one who puts false memories in people's minds!'

Reg gave Smokey a barely perceptible wink. 'Lethe wants you all to have the best care money can buy while the Glory Foundation gets to the bottom of who is behind this. She has arranged for you to meet with her talented twin, Alitheia, who will help separate the truth from the lies.'

Smokey almost laughed out loud at Reg's audacity, but his mother looked so worried and frightened that he held it in. He hadn't realised how difficult it was going to be to untangle the deceptions Lethe had instigated. But that was a job for another day. The priority now was to just keep going.

As the car ate up the miles, Reg and Smokey became engrossed in their own thoughts. Reg cursed himself inwardly for letting his guard down; Titus Stigmurus was still as dangerous as ever. Ever since VergissMeinNicht had instigated the Riots, the Righteous had been scattered. It was time for them to regroup.

He whispered to Smokey, 'We'll need a headquarters, somewhere to gather in secret, far from the prying eyes of the Vermin.'

Smokey smiled conspiratorially. 'Tell me, Reg,' he replied, 'have you ever heard of a place called Burlington?'



Titus was not pleased. He had been staggering about in these stinking sewers for what felt like hours.

He was cold and damp and he had lost a shoe. He had no idea what had happened. One moment he had held Jacob Ashe's life in his hands, the next he had awoken dazed and battered in a pool of sewage. He had tried to make his way back into the Atlantis bookshop but the trapdoor would not budge. He had no other choice than to retrace Smokey's footsteps.

He paused to appreciate Wheezy's murals. They appealed to a part of himself that he had not indulged since repenting. His recent conversion had filled the space in his heart with hope, but now, the anger had returned. To think, he had actually been grateful to Jacob for torturing him in the CUT facility - he had inadvertently shown him the way, but now all Titus could feel for the boy was a burning need for revenge. Before leaving, he took one long, last look at Wheezy's exquisite eye for disturbing detail and made a mental note to track down this most talented of artists at the earliest opportunity.

Finally, he was on familiar ground. Luckily for him too, as Smokey's footsteps ended soon after, next to an abandoned tunnel cart. He pressed on and before long was at the laboratory. His heart sank at the memory of Darren and he leaned on the glass, looking in at the corpse still lying on the gurney. It was then that he noticed a door marked *Strictly Private. No Entry*. He was puzzled. He had no recollection of seeing that door before.

Titus swept into the laboratory and strode across the room. He tried his master key in the lock to no avail. Now all of his irritation came to a head. He was the head of the Glory Foundation, and expected to be fully informed of the activities done in the name of his organisation.

Of course, this would be one of Lethe's projects. He was well aware of the rift that was opening between them, and her scepticism about the prophecy and the Child of Glory. He also knew that her hunger for supremacy was growing and that she would use people's faith in the prophecies, including his, to further her own agenda. The time would come when

she would seek to usurp him. He smiled grimly. However pious Titus had become, he was first and foremost a man of power and no-one, not even his favourite protégée, was going to snatch that from him.

Titus went to draw his Luger then remembered it was still in the Atlantis bookshop. With a snarl of rage he kicked the door in and entered Lethe's secret domain.

The room was small, dominated by a huge viewing screen and a bank of controls – Air. Heat. Life Support Pressure.

Titus turned on the power to the screen.



The door to Lethe Lacuna's office burst open. She reached for her pearl handled revolver, but Paul was too quick for her. He snatched the gun and with it pressed into the small of her back propelled her down the corridor towards room 317.

'I had forgotten how impulsive you can be,' purred Lethe. 'The memories come flooding back!'

Paul tightened his grip on her arm. 'Just take me to Ali and Jo,' he snarled. 'And page for a medical team to join us. Now.'

'You forget, I am a doctor,' protested Lethe.

Paul laughed sardonically. 'I mean a doctor who understands something about healing. Someone I would trust to help my wife. That rules you right out.'



Jo had just finished telling Matthew what had happened when another voice broke into her thoughts.

***I knew you'd come. I'm so glad you made it. Welcome to the Land of Invisible Souls.***

Jo could not believe what she was experiencing. She stared into the beautiful room. One of the patients slowly propelled his wheelchair towards her and opened the door. She was face to face with someone she had never expected to see again.

***Everard?***





Jonathon Mallory had no idea what was going on. He had been quietly going about his rounds when his pager beeped. He was summoned to bring two medics with a canvas stretcher to meet Madame Lacuna and a companion outside room 317. On his arrival, Madame reminded them all about the secrecy clause in their contracts, then said there was a wounded woman in a crypt beneath the hospital. Her companion emanated impatience and barely concealed fury.

Jonathon maintained a grave expression as he listened to Lethe, but beneath the surface he struggled with the most powerful yearning he had ever known. He noticed, with approval, that Lethe had dispensed with the mask she had worn habitually since returning from America. Her beauty was breath-taking. He found it hard to concentrate.

As they entered the room Lethe stumbled over the threshold. Jonathon reached out to steady her, then frowned slightly. 'Your foot is slightly swollen, Madame,' he murmured. 'May I?' He bent and took Lethe's elegantly shod foot in his hand, barely able to contain the desire that flooded through him. He started to say more, but Lethe simply said, 'Later.'

Jonathon thought, *She is exquisite. I think she likes me. I will do anything she asks of me.*

Lethe thought, *He is handsome. And infatuated with me. He will do anything I ask of him.* She rewarded him with a dazzling smile, inwardly revelling in the return of her beauty and her power over men. As if in a dream, he took her hand and kissed it.

'Oh, for God's sake,' scowled Paul. 'Save the bedside manner for later.'

Now for some inexplicable reason they were standing together inside a crowded wardrobe. Jonathon could smell Lethe's perfume, hear her soft breathing. He longed to reach out and stroke her pearly skin. With a super-human effort he clung on by the fingernails to his professionalism, but his life had changed forever. He was hopelessly besotted.



Titus waited patiently. First came a title; *The Lazarus Project*, then a place he had never seen was revealed on the monitor. A split level screen showed a small complex of rooms, all spacious and beautifully decorated. When Titus touched one section; that view filled the screen. He could see people in wheelchairs; they looked ill and haggard.

He watched as a woman entered the room, took a book from the bookcase and left. Despite her terrible pallor and obvious infirmity, Titus immediately recognised a beautiful and very famous actress who had recently died.



'But I thought you were dead?'

Everard shook Jo warmly by the hand, his voice trembling with emotion as he thanked her, over and over again, for coming. No-one in the room beyond paid her any attention – with her violet tabard she looked like one of the nurses or attendants. Jo stared and stared. At last he answered her question.

'As far as the world is concerned, I am. But your brilliant aunt's Lazarus project keeps us living, just about, whilst she investigates our illnesses. We are her pilot group; the ultimate guinea pigs.'

Jo was appalled. He looked so ill; so sad. 'Why would you agree to such a thing?'

'As you see, we live, or rather exist, in the lap of luxury, and contribute to medical research in return. We have every possible treatment from the traditional to the ultra-modern, and every kind of drug; legal or illegal. Most of all, our families are generously provided for. We have the comfort of knowing they will lack for nothing. Before we were a terrible drain on their energy and resources.'

Jo could hear the powerful emotion behind his words. 'Do they know? Your family?'

'No. They believe we are dead. It is best for them. The world is not yet ready to judge your aunt's work favourably, even though the benefits to humankind will

be incalculable. If this place were discovered, it would be shut down in a heartbeat.'

'How can you bear it? Living, but not living?'

'I converse. I think. I remember. I read. I write. I hope. Above all...' Everard paused before continuing. 'Above all, I live in hope. I hope you will agree to sometimes come back here with news of my beloved wife and children.'

Jo was aghast at the enormity of the request. She realised immediately that her discovery of Lethe's secret work would not go unpunished. Everard knew that as well. Jo remembered Allardyce cautioning her about his brother's selfishness; his wild and reckless streak. *Looks like he had a point*, she thought.



Whatever the details, parts of Lethe's project were instantly crystal clear. People were declared dead, then spirited away to some secret location so Lethe could conduct experiments for her research.

His face like thunder, Titus realised just how dangerous Lethe had become. Whatever else, she must be reined in. She needed to be controlled. He had been tolerant long enough, allowing her undoubted genius to blind him to her ravaging ambition. As he stared at the images he vowed that this travesty, this Limbo, this affront to God, must be terminated.

If Titus had not been so angry, he might have noticed that Jo was there, talking with a man who was vaguely familiar. He broke off from studying the screen and the control panel when he heard voices coming towards the laboratory.

Titus quickly switched off the monitor and made his way back to the laboratory, carefully placing the broken door closed behind him.



'Why me?' asked Jo.

'Because our connection is so strong. I know you felt it. I realised you could be a link with my previous life. In our final days on the surface we were brought

here several times, to see if we were prepared to go through with it. We were blindfolded, but I share your ability to use other people's eyes, although mine is rather more developed. I could see everything. I studied the route. I noticed the ancient markers – the finger bones and pentagons, and smeared them with saliva so they would show up when you used the torch I sent you. I managed to take a mould of the key when two of the attendants, thinking I couldn't see them, indulged in a little heavy flirtation. Sex is so distracting. Then I added an extra level to the treasure hunt just for you. Did you work it all out, by the way?'

'Yes – though not on my own.' Jo thought about Morten and blushed.

Everard laughed as he read her thoughts. 'Well, well, well. A win on two counts! So will you do as I ask? Please? Just once in a while? It would transform this existence to have news of them.'

Jo heard the urgency of his request and tried to imagine being in his position. She really empathised with his anguish, but she also felt pressured.

'I need to think about it. Why do I have to come back? Can't we just emp each other?'

'All the quartz in the ossuary and the sacrificial room makes emping impossible. But as you have no doubt realised, by the time you get here, the effect has worn off. I discovered that the first time your aunt came here. I could read her easily. She did not seem aware that I had done so.'

'Be careful. She can emp. What would happen to you if she found out I was bringing you news of your family?'

'I would be disconnected from the life support systems and the generous pension to my family would stop. She would also be livid with you.'

Jo thought back to their recent struggle. Her hand was still bleeding from the bite mark.

'No change there. She's already livid with me. She shot my mother! Her own sister!'

Everard's face was a mask of concern. 'Do you think she would have you killed?'

Jo considered the question. 'Probably not. I have something she wants so I'm probably safe from the ultimate wrath of the loathsome foe.'

Jo sensed Everard's amusement.



Lethe, Paul, Doctor Mallory and the paramedics entered the laboratory. They were surprised to see Titus; Lethe especially so. She knew he found the laboratory sickening and avoided going there. That had been most useful as she made her secret plans.

Paul cut to the chase. 'Ali and Jo are here. Ali's been shot. We need to help her and find Jo.'

Titus was all concern. 'Of course. Lethe knows every nook and cranny down here. I assure you, she will do all she can to help her sister and find her favourite niece.'

'She better had,' snarled Paul. 'Seeing as how this is all her fault.'

'I promise you she will be held to account,' pledged Titus. 'For all her misdemeanours.' A plan was forming in his mind. 'But now, the priority is to find Alithea. Lead the way, Lethe. I shall wait here for your return.'

Lethe's eyes flicked to the broken doorframe and her stomach lurched. He knew.

Calmly she did as she was told and led the small group towards the ossuary. In the narrow passageway, she took advantage of the need for single file to surreptitiously operate the pager in her pocket



'Everard, I must get back to my mum. My dad should be there by now, but I need to know for sure.'

'Of course you do. But before you go, please promise me you will do as I ask.'

Jo felt torn. She hated to say no, but she knew in her heart that she could never return to the room of fire and blood.

Everard sensed her reluctance and, as he probed her thoughts, he realised even before she did that once

Jo left she would never come back. He'd been afraid of this. All his hopes were dashed.

Jo looked at Everard with deep compassion. 'I'm very sorry, I really wish I could help but you're asking too much of me. Maybe...'

Sudden disappointment and despair filled Everard with rage. His face twisted with fury and in a moment of madness he lunged for Jo, wrapping his hands around her throat.

In that case you'll never leave here alive,' he spat. 'Just like me, you will never see your precious family again.'



Ali was a ghastly shade of grey. Her breathing was shallow and Jonathon Mallory's handsome face was grave. Yet even as he concentrated on the pretty woman lying injured in this terrible bone repository, he was achingly aware of her twin, illuminating the crypt with her magnificent beauty. With a supreme effort and force of will he made himself attend to his patient.

Paul had no idea if Ali even realised he was there. He stood back as the doctor and paramedics did their work and prepared to take Ali to the operating theatre.

As soon as Ali was safely on her way Paul turned on Lethe. 'Right. Where's my daughter?' he demanded.

Lethe shrugged. 'I have no idea where my wretched niece is, but I imagine she has blundered into the secret room behind the image of Saint Lazarus.' She indicated the opening in the wall and Paul grabbed her and pulled her along with him.

Lethe concealed a smile as they entered the blood-red room. She waited for him to register his surroundings. She did not have long to wait. Paul was visibly shocked. 'Don't let Titus hear you say that,' she warned, as a profanity escaped his lips. Everyone was similarly afflicted on seeing the room of blood and fire for the first time.

Suddenly Lethe's smile vanished as she walked towards the sunken bath. Instead of a floor of blood red tiles there was a gaping void. That brat had

managed to activate the secret staircase, which inevitably meant she had discovered the Lazarus Project.

'What's this? demanded Paul, looking over the rim of the bath.

Lethe was too weary for sarcasm 'It's a staircase.'

'I meant, where does it go?'

'To an isolation ward,' answered Lethe calmly. However, her thoughts were not in the least serene. She would not allow her work to be compromised. Jo must be found, and she and her meddlesome father disposed of, once and for all. Whatever aspirations Lethe had for Jo had just been jettisoned.

With that, she lunged for Paul. He had taken his eyes off her for but a moment and Lethe had been waiting for it. With a look of horror he teetered backwards over the edge of the staircase, yet just before he fell, Lethe snaked out an arm and grabbed him by the collar.

'Goodbye, Paul,' she purred, leaning in for a kiss as he dangled helplessly. But at the last minute she grabbed the gun from his flailing hand and with a triumphant laugh sent him clattering down the spiral stairs.

Coolly, Lethe checked the pistol for bullets, then turned on her heel and headed back to the laboratory. Intoxicated with her daring and triumph, she gave little heed to the pain in her foot.



Jo struggled to shake Everard's grip. She was surprised at his strength, and shocked that he had turned on her. As he slowly squeezed the life out of her, Jo wished she had heeded Allardyce's warning.



Titus was standing in front of the control panel, watching the Lazarus Project patients. He heard the click of high-heeled footsteps behind him and turned to face the woman he had once loved beyond reason.

Now his heart was closed and his expression that of a hanging judge. 'You are a monster,' he said quietly.

Lethe calmly countered his accusation. 'You taught me everything I know.'

Titus seemed to grow in stature. He gestured at the screen.

'This atrocity is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. I will cast it out. You will not mock the Holy Spirit. You will not play God.'

'But you will,' answered Lethe. 'You presume to know what your God wants, and then you insist that others live by your creed.'

'I do indeed. I decide who lives... and who dies.'

He stepped to one side. Lethe gasped with horror. 'What have you done?'

Jo couldn't breathe. Desperately she tried to grab her attacker, but her arms felt dull and heavy. The sound of her heartbeat echoed in her ears as she felt the pressure around her throat increase. She felt as if her head would burst.

Burnley's eyes were bulging and foam was upon his lips. Suddenly his expression changed to one of terror. Despite herself, Jo followed his gaze through to another room filled with the patients on life support systems.

Some of them were convulsing, others were calling out piteously. Alarms sounded, then stopped abruptly. The lights flashed, then went out.



## Chapter Twenty – A Ringside Seat

Paul awoke in the pitch black in agony. He knew something was terribly wrong. His limbs were all out of place. He struggled to move and in so doing, slid and bounced further down the spiral staircase. He reached out to grab hold of the stair above him, but his fingers were dislocated. He rolled and cracked and bounced and only came to a stop when his head slammed against a wall.

He was still in darkness. Blood filled his eyes and mouth. He was completely disorientated and bordering on shock. Gingerly, carefully, he checked himself. He didn't get far. The moment he tried to move he screamed and collapsed. Everything felt broken.

In his anguish he cried out for help. There was no reply. He hollered again, louder. Nothing. In desperation he even tried calling to Lethe.

And then, at the point when hope was almost gone, a great calm came over him.

Strange words came to him from another world; the land of his Lakota ancestors. Paul offered up the ancient prayer.

*Ate Wankantanka, Mitawa ki...  
My Father, Great Spirit  
I need your help and wisdom.*

As his supplication ended and silence fell all around, Paul heard the faintest whisper, rising from the depths of the earth like a feather on the wind.

***Daddy – help me!***

New found hope flooded his heart. Gritting his teeth, he gently pushed himself down the stairs. He knew that he was Jo's only hope. If he were to fall...

'I won't fall.' The sound of his voice was oddly comforting in the darkness, and shakily he started to sing.

*Hush, little baby, don't say a word...*



Lethe stared at a tangle of severed wires and flashing emergency lights.

Titus answered her calmly. 'I have turned off the life support systems. Those particular patients, the poor souls you had wired up like Christmas trees, are now dead, as they should have been long ago. As for the others, the heating and air supplies are also cut off. It is now deathly cold down there. With compromised immune systems, the remaining patients will quickly succumb to a merciful sleep from which they will never awaken. They will die the peaceful deaths you have denied them.'

Lethe could hardly speak for fury. 'As well as being a murderer with a Messianic complex you are a sentimental fool, Titus.' Her voice dripped contempt. 'Before this *peaceful death* of yours occurs, my patients will shiver uncontrollably; their exposed skin will become blue and puffy; they will be confused and unable to walk. Soon their muscles will become rigid... but why go on? I don't need to describe what will happen – we have a ringside seat. You can watch them die.'

To her surprise, a profound sadness washed over Lethe's black and bitter heart. Sadness for her patients, who had trusted her. Sadness for her audacious project. And sadness because she knew there was no going back to the time when Titus had adored her. She steeled herself to look at the screen.



Everard looked about in horror and, in so doing, slackened his grip.

A moment was all it took. Jo pulled herself free and turned to run. Everard lunged after her, moving as fast as his wheelchair would allow. Jo tried to run but she could hardly move; her legs had turned to lead and she fell to her knees.

Burnley bore down upon her, a manic glint in his eye. He reached for her ankle but she managed to kick his hand away. He wheeled round again and drove

straight at her, but at the last second she rolled to one side and dragged herself towards the door.

She heard him curse as he overshot and tried to spin his chair back around again. There was a clatter behind her followed by a cry. She turned in time to see, as if in slow motion, Everard's wheelchair topple over sideways, then she was through the door. She slammed it shut behind her.



Each step was agonising. With every movement Paul wanted to stop and cry. But he could not stop; his darling daughter needed him. He sang on.

*Papa's gonna buy... you a... mocking bird...*

As he sang the old lullaby, it seemed as if the darkness in the stairwell was diminishing. He wondered if it was really getting lighter, or if he was deceiving himself. Perhaps he had simply adjusted to the velvet blackness.

*And if... that... dog...*

He collapsed. He could go no further.



Panic set in among the Lazarus Project patients. With some already dead, it was obvious that something was terribly wrong. One man tried to activate the panic button, but his movements were stilted and stiff, then finally he was still. A porcelain-pale woman scrawled the word *HELP* on a piece of paper, trying to hold it in front of the security cameras, but it fell from her frozen, unresponsive fingers.

Titus turned away from the screen. 'I am putting right the wrong you perpetrated by allowing these poor souls to continue living.'

Lethe could bear it no more. With a cry of fury she launched herself at Titus, raking his face with her pointed fingernails. She was gratified to hear him

scream in pain as he clutched his eye, instantly sinking to his knees.

'Who do you think you are?' she demanded. 'What gives you the right to judge anyone?' With a vicious kick she sent Titus sprawling to the floor. 'I gave you everything. I worshipped you – and this is what you give me in return?' Lethe had never felt so hurt.

Titus looked up at her with his one good eye, blood from the other seeping between his fingers. 'You never knew the meaning of worship, Lethe. Would that you had.'

'Enough!' cried Lethe. She raised her pistol towards his face. He bowed his head before her. Emotions battled for control within her. She did not want to have to do this.

As Paul lay there wheezing and bleeding, the sound of someone screaming came from below. With a gut-wrenching howl of determination, he forced himself up and half slid down the next few steps.

*THAT DOG...  
named Ro... Ro... Rover... won't bark*

Pain seared through his soul. Lights flashed before his eyes. It would be so easy to let go, to relax into calming... water? He could hear water. Paul felt himself slipping into unconsciousness.

Through the picture window Jo saw sparks and flashes erupting as electrical fires started in the wiring. Water crept into the passage way which swiftly began to fill. She watched Everard Burnley as his expression ran the gamut of emotion from rage to realisation to panic to desperation to pleading.

Jo raised her shields to block out his emps and in the end she looked away.

Titus surveyed the scene. He was a man of many talents - one, which he kept a closely guarded secret, was the ability to see in infra-red. It was Titus who had long ago discovered the ossuary beneath Glory Heights by way of the invisible finger bone markers. The talent had served to help him find the original hiding place for his Junkers 88 in America and he had used it to track Smokey's movements of late, including retracing the glowing heat signature of his footsteps in the sewers. Right now, despite the pain, his infra-red vision revealed that Lethe's foot was inflamed; there was an object in the sole of her shoe causing her a great deal of irritation. Slowly, he lowered himself to the floor.

'Forgive me,' he murmured, supplicating himself before her. Lethe hesitated. This just made things harder but she knew she had no other choice.

'You're right,' said Titus sorrowfully. 'I should have worshipped you in return.' Gently he reached towards her shoe. 'I am not worthy to kiss your feet.' Tears filled Lethe's eyes as she cocked the pistol.

In the split-second before she pulled the trigger, Titus squeezed her foot hard. Crippling pain shot through her leg as Lethe toppled over, firing her bullet harmlessly into the wall beside her. In no time at all their roles had reversed and Titus had the pistol pointing at her.



Jo's strength was failing fast. She was getting colder by the minute and her breathing was laboured. Shivering uncontrollably, she dragged herself to the spiral staircase, but before she could even reach the first step her vision started to dim. She collapsed, unconscious, to the ground.



Still cradling his bleeding face, Titus spoke levelly. 'If you were not so talented, so invaluable to the Glory Foundation, I would execute you here and now. But I have decided to keep your waywardness within bounds.'

He paused before continuing, relishing the simplicity and aptness of his plan. 'I have sent a message to my – my – team that you have been taken ill and are temporarily deranged. You need to be confined for your own protection. In the fullness of time a dangerous heart condition will be diagnosed, and you will become the latest beneficiary of the Heartsease programme.'

Carl appeared in the doorway. Lethe felt a surge of hope - he had received her page and had taken action - but the hope died as he faced Titus and saluted. Lethe groaned, only now realising how fully she had come to rely on Sebastian.

Titus nodded at Carl before turning back to Lethe. 'Right on cue. You will be taken to a secret location prior to surgery. You will be afforded every comfort. After the operation, I will personally take control of your recovery and future well-being. You will co-operate with me at all times for I will, in effect, hold your heart in my hands.'

Titus watched impassively as Carl dragged Lethe away. None of them noticed the little sprig of mugwort fall from her shoe.

*Papa's... gonna... buy you... a... horse and cart...*

Paul lay there twitching, his voice no more than a croak. He was completely disorientated. He could not see or hear a thing and he was bitterly cold. A small mercy, considering his broken bones.

He tried to stand but just fell further. He gave up and let himself roll. After a tumult of agony he finally crashed through the bottom stairs and sprawled onto the freezing floor.

And there she was, his beautiful girl, collapsed and cold and still out of reach. He called her name but she did not stir. He reached for her but only made himself cry out in pain.

Paul wept at the unfairness of it all. His beloved wife lay dying, his darling daughter lay dying and,

unless he acted quickly, he would surely die too. The thought galvanized him into action.

Inch by agonising inch, moment by eternal moment, using every ounce of his heart and soul, Paul dragged himself along by his few unbroken fingertips. His head swam and his body screamed but he kept on moving.

*If...*

*that...*

*horse...*

*and...*

*cart...*

*fall...*

*down...*

Until finally, he reached her. He cradled Jo in his arms, his warm tears falling on her closed eyelids. Her breathing was almost imperceptible, but she was alive.

*You'll still be the sweetest... little... baby... in town*

Paul wept. He'd come so far but there was no way he could carry Jo back to the hospital. The only consolation he could find was that she wouldn't die alone. He buried his face in her auburn curls and sobbed.

Jo did not respond, she just grew colder in his aching embrace.



The Lazarus Project was now a tomb. Nothing moved. Bodies floated lifelessly in the freezing floodwater.

And then, there came a voice.

'Come on, old chap; let's get you away from here.'  
Paul looked up into the last face he ever expected to see.

'I saw the whole thing on the monitor. I have emergency teams on standby at Glory Heights.'

Titus leaned over the helpless pair and carefully pressed the five corners of the pentagon hidden among the tiles. It was invisible to Paul, but thanks to his night-vision, Titus could see it clear as day, despite having lost the use of one eye.

As the spiral staircase began to rise, Paul reached up a shaking hand and with a barely perceptible gasp said, 'Thank you.'



## Epilogue

The little church was crowded. Bells rang out joyfully as the last guests took their places. The groom looked anxious, like so many before him. Would his bride ever arrive?

And then the bells ceased their clamour and the sweet notes of the organ soared towards Heaven. The bride, elegant in lavender lace, walked steadily towards the love of her long and difficult life, smiling as she had never smiled before.

Jo looked across the aisle to where Brenda, all smiles, cradled Josie in her arms. The little girl cooed happily, secure in her aunt's loving embrace.

Next to Brenda, Reg tried to concentrate on the wedding ceremony, but he was deeply troubled. Someone had revealed the plan to rescue Smokey to Titus Stigmurus. The problem was, only one other person knew of the plan. And she was sitting next to him.

At the very moment that Matthew leaned over to kiss his bride, the long-suffering Nurse Carson tried to administer an injection to the most difficult patient she had ever had the misfortune to look after.

'You'll soon be feeling nice and relaxed,' she said, through gritted teeth, as the patient tried to knock the hypodermic out of her hand.

'There is nothing wrong with me!' shouted Lethe Lacuna, as two burly orderlies overcame her. 'You'll all pay for this!'

The nurse was normally the most compassionate of souls, but Madame Lacuna had stretched her tolerance to breaking point. Obviously it was a terrible tragedy for such a high-flier to be laid low with this awful condition, but she seemed oblivious to the enormous effort that nice Mr. Stigmurus had gone to on her behalf. Without the operation she would be dead within weeks, yet she showed no gratitude for all the care lavished upon her.

Ah well. After the operation Madame would be someone else's responsibility. She would recover from

surgery in the best convalescent home in the world, on Lake Brienz in Switzerland, and the nurse would take a well-deserved break with her husband and their little girl. She smiled to herself and prepared another syringe.

'Sebastian! Where is Sebastian?!' shrieked Lethe.

This time the injection was successfully administered. As the pre-med took effect, the patient had no choice but to surrender to the powerful drug coursing through her veins.

She was just slipping into unconsciousness when the surgeon appeared. A handsome face swam into her line of vision. Doctor Jonathon Mallory took her unresisting hand in his, and raised it to his lips. 'Don't be afraid,' he whispered. 'You're in safe hands, I promise.' And as the darkness caressed and engulfed her, drawing her into ever deeper sleep, his smile was the last thing she saw.

Jo's mother protects her memories;  
her aunt can destroy them.  
Jo doesn't know it yet, but she  
has more power than either of them.

Suitable for age 12 and upwards.

FORGET ME KNOT  
MOURNING GLORY  
HEART SEIZE

P.N.E.

SINNERMAN STAR

OXIDE A-Z

POISON I.V.



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