

PART ONE OF
THE WOLFBLOOD PROPHECIES

FORGET ME KNOT



AVRIL SILK



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by

AVRIL SILK



BOOK ONE

of

THE WOLFBLOOD PROPHECIES

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This book is dedicated
to my son James.

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*"...there must be darkness to see the stars.
The dance is always danced above the hollow place,
above the terrible abyss."*

From *The Farthest Shore* by Ursula Le Guin.

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Chapter One – Double Rainbow

The sky was the colour of lead. A solitary cyclist battled against the downpour before admitting defeat and taking shelter among the ancient trees that lined the long, straight road. It was an old Roman road, and headed due south to the heart of London.

A year ago, there had been riots in the capital when the poor, sinking deeper into debt and poverty, could no longer tolerate the excesses of the rich and powerful. The authorities had acted swiftly, brutally suppressing the rebels and forcing them underground. More people were relieved by this than were troubled.

Life seemed back on track. Commuters still took the train from the little local junction. Drivers still endured traffic jams and pollution in order to take part in all that London had to offer. No-one asked too many questions.

The downpour continued but now the afternoon sun shone and the raindrops sparkled as they fell. An unearthly golden glow turned the leaden sky to burnished pewter as bands of dazzling colour blazed overhead. Above the arc of bold, brilliant colours the dark sky had a metallic sheen; inside the arc the sky was lighter, almost silvery.

Jo Lakota had never seen such a rainbow. The colours pulsed and throbbed, startling in their vibrancy. To her delight, a second, paler arc appeared. This was the first double rainbow she had seen and she noticed that the colours of the outer arc were in the opposite order to its more vivid twin. As she stood in the rain, her copper curls were soaked, but nothing could dampen her spirits. The school term had ended and tomorrow she was off to Paris with her glamorous Aunt Lethe. The thought sustained her as she completed her journey home.

Jo turned into the gateway of the pretty cottage where she lived with her parents, Paul and Ali Lakota. Aunt Lethe's sleek and elegant forget-me-not blue limousine was parked in the drive. Jo threw her bike

down on the lawn and ran to the front door. The perfect rainbow began to fade.

As soon as she opened the door, Jo felt the tension emanating from the sitting room. She knew instantly that she had interrupted a blazing row – there was a sense of angry words hanging in the air. She stood in the hallway, her heart sinking.

From the beginning Jo had known instinctively that her father did not want her to go to Paris with Aunt Lethe. As the highly paid chief executive of VergissMeinNicht Lethe was able to afford all the luxuries that money could buy. Jo's parents valued simplicity and did not want Lethe flaunting her wealth in front of their daughter.

Ali was a more restless spirit than Paul and supported Jo's longing for adventure. She felt torn between her daughter and her husband. Jo had her work cut out to persuade her parents to agree to let her go. Her campaign of extra chores, careful saving and all-round sweetness and light seemed to have paid off. So she had packed her rucksack and crossed her fingers.

I know you were arguing. Jo emped her mother despondently. ***Mum, I really, really want to go.***

I know, love, came the reply. ***Don't give up. Come on in. Your aunt is looking forward to seeing you again.***

Jo went into the cosy, book lined sitting room. The atmosphere was very tense. The fact that everyone was making an effort to be normal only made things worse.

Aunt Lethe looked gorgeous despite her obvious anger. She was immaculately groomed – everything around her looked shabby and worn. Paul and Ali had tried to rise to the occasion, but their village best looked parochial and dowdy next to Lethe's haute couture elegance. Jo felt disloyal, but wished they had stuck with their normal clothes – it seemed better to not try and compete rather than to try and fail so completely.

It was hard to believe that Jo's aunt and mother were twins. At twelve, but longing to be fifteen, Jo couldn't help but contrast her aunt's fashionable, slim beauty with her mother's comfortable prettiness. She longed to be like Lethe, sleek and slender, exuding wealth and luxury.

Lethe's face transformed when she saw Jo. As they hugged Jo breathed in Lethe's expensive perfume and smiled. Whatever Paul had been going to say, he thought better of it and walked to the window instead. As the tension in the room subsided, Ali visibly relaxed and made herself busy preparing supper.

Lethe asked Jo all the right questions about school and her best friend Samantha. She chattered gaily about their forthcoming trip. She noticed the pretty new wallpaper in Jo's bedroom and cast a critical eye over her wardrobe, promising some new clothes in Paris. Determined to be agreeable, she praised Ali's herb garden and the meal she cooked with home-grown vegetables.

The uneasy truce prevailed during supper and afterwards Lethe continued to shine. While Ali was busy making coffee Jo and Paul took her to the conservatory to see Calico's new tortoiseshell kittens. Lethe made a valiant stab at enthusiasm but Calico wasn't fooled. She hissed ferociously. Lethe did not like cats, and clearly the feeling was mutual.

'Such pretty creatures,' said Lethe, acknowledging the kittens' tawny beauty, then, looking directly at Paul, she continued, 'Easy to forget *the tiger heart that pants beneath.*'

Jo had no idea what was going on but she felt the emotional temperature change. Her father's face darkened. 'I believe the quote continues,' he said. '*This velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang.*'

'How well you remember.' Lethe turned to Jo. 'Your father and I once shared a passion, Jo, for Herman Melville's books. Especially *The Whale.*' Her voice was light, but there was darkness behind her words. 'Do you still have that first edition I bought you, Paul?'

'Probably. It's around somewhere.' Paul's reply was off-hand but his face was stormy. All hopes of Paris faded dramatically.

Jo emped her mother. ***'Mum! Dad's being a real pain! Why's he acting so weird?'***

'Ancient history, love. A very long story, I'm afraid.'

'Well, please come and sort him out.'

Ali appeared in the doorway. She looked hot and flustered. 'Coffee's ready. Lethe and Paul, stop arguing, for goodness sake. We need to sort this out. I know it's a great opportunity for Jo, but...'

Lethe's voice was mocking. 'But nothing. When you were Jo's age you would have fought like a tiger to go, and you know it.'

'The world was a lot less dangerous then,' answered Ali defiantly.

'Oh, Ali, what on earth do you think will possibly happen? She will be perfectly safe with me. You're acting like I intend to abduct her.'

'I wouldn't put it past you.' Paul spoke recklessly.

That was it. Jo erupted. 'For goodness sake, Dad! You're being completely unreasonable!' She was surprised at herself. She had never directly challenged him before.

Paul too had reached the end of his tether. 'I've had enough of this. Johanna, go to your room. This discussion is between your aunt, your mother, and me. You are not going to Paris.'

Jo was so shocked she didn't argue. She just stared at her father.

'I said, *Go to your room!* NOW!'



Jo had never seen her father so angry. She wanted to shout and stamp in protest and disbelief, but no words came. Like an automaton, she climbed the stairs, her impassive face masking her disappointment and resentment.

She slammed the door angrily in a pointless gesture of defiance then sat despondently on her bed and stared at her rucksack, all packed and ready for the

great adventure. She kicked it half-heartedly. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and pulled a face at her reflection. Her untameable corkscrew coppery curls were the bane of her life and then there were the freckles. Ali called them gold dust; Jo called them blotches and hated them intensely. People said she looked interesting. *Interesting*. It was not a word she wanted to hear. Neither did she want to hear the other word, used so approvingly about her by teachers and other sundry grown-ups. Sensible. Jo had a sneaking suspicion that people who were sensible didn't have much fun.

However discontented she felt with her appearance, Jo could not find fault with her dramatic and unusual eyes. Ali, Lethe and Jo all had green eyes, startling in their intensity.

Jo turned away from the mirror. The argument still raged downstairs. Ali and Lethe had forgotten to raise their shields so Jo could tune into everything they said. Sooner or later her mother would realise she was being emp'd, and shut Jo out, but for a while she listened hard. Paul couldn't emp, but his voice was loud enough for Jo to make out most of his words anyway.

Sure enough, Ali suddenly realised Jo was tuned in, and the clamour died down. Silence fell. At a loose end, Jo picked up her photograph album, and flicked through the pages half-heartedly. Ali and Paul, Calico and the kittens; Samantha, wearing her mother's best hat and laughing at the camera. No-one ever called Samantha sensible. She attracted good fortune, was funny, vivacious and pretty-but-not-too-pretty. The perfect best friend.

Jo was being drawn back into the emotional storm. Her empathic power was so great, and their emotions running so high, Ali and Lethe could not maintain their shields. Jo could read the menace and triumph pulsing in Lethe's mind. She could feel Ali struggling against a growing, desperate fear. The fear billowed and surged until Jo felt a wave of pure terror engulf her mother just as her father's angry, bitter voice rang out. 'I remember it well,' he snarled. 'And I wish I didn't.'

'Done,' said Lethe evenly and triumphant. 'My pleasure. You only had to ask.' She laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh.

There was a crash. Ali screamed. 'Paul! What have you done to him, Lethe? What have you done? Paul? Paul!'

Something terrible had just happened. Jo froze as her mind was overloaded with sensations and impressions. The clamour was dreadful. Her father was hurt – her mother distraught. And her aunt... her aunt was calling her. 'Jo! Go to the car.'

Suddenly Jo sprang back to life, desperate to find out what had happened. She heard her aunt's high heels in the hallway, heading towards the stairs up to Jo's room. Then she heard her mother running after Lethe.

There was a heavy thud and a gasp as Lethe was knocked to the floor. Hardly able to believe it, Jo could hear punching, slapping and sobbing as the sisters fought at the foot of the stairs. 'You will not take her,' grunted Ali, her voice almost unrecognisable.

Jo was transfixed with horror, then, over and above the terrible noises that were coming from the hall, Alithea emped Jo. Her voice resounded in Jo's mind. Just one word.

RUN.

Jo ran. She grabbed her rucksack, and ran to the window. She dropped onto the shed roof, then onto the log store, and onto the path, as she had done so many times that summer when meeting Samantha. Together they had explored the night while her parents slept, unsuspecting.

Lethe's chauffeur, Sebastian, was leaning against the limo, smoking and listening to something so loud you could hear it in spite of the headphones. Jo instinctively recoiled from Sebastian. He was stick-thin with an abnormally large head. His body was spindly and his round face was white and pasty. Sebastian was unwholesome and sinister. He glided like a shadow with

a smile that made you shiver. Jo shuddered and ducked behind the hedge. He didn't seem to have noticed her.

Stealthily Jo made her way towards her bike, thankful that she had just flung it down by the gate. She had been so excited about Lethe's visit and the trip to Paris. It seemed like an age ago, but it was no more than a few hours. Now everything had changed.

Jo had almost reached her bike when she heard the front door open. Light blazed out from the hall. Lethe and her mother stood framed in the doorway. Both women were dishevelled and bloody. Ali was clearly trying to stop her sister from leaving – trying to buy Jo time. For a moment Jo froze, unable to take her eyes off her mother. Ali must have felt Jo's hesitation. Again, she emp'd. **JO! RUN NOW!** Of her father there was no sign. As Sebastian stubbed out his cigarette and ran to his mistress's assistance, Jo leapt onto her bike and pedalled off furiously.

The moon was cloud-covered, and the wind was getting up. A fine, penetrating rain was falling. Jo shivered, wishing she'd grabbed a coat. Behind her she could hear a car – hardly more than a purr in the distance. Instinctively she swerved off the road between the trees and flung the bike to the ground, lying over it and covering the reflectors as best she could.

The car was nearer now, but Jo could see no lights. She guessed they had counted on creeping up on her in the dark, calculating that the lights would alert her sooner than the sound of the engine. Jo hardly dared breathe. Now the car was very close, driving slowly, a long, dark shadow; a panther creeping up on its prey.

As Jo lay still, breathing in the smell of the damp earth and willing the car to go past, she tried to emp her mother. Instantly her mother's voice was in her head. **Dark. Red. Shadow.** Jo's heart sank. This was their secret code, established when they began to explore their gift of empathic communication. *Dark* meant don't transmit. *Red* was for danger and *Shadow* meant someone was trying to track their link, like tapping a phone-line. Jo and her mother always knew

when they had eavesdroppers; there was a sound just like someone picking up an extension phone and listening in; the echo of silence in an empty room.

Jo realised what her mother had already worked out. Lethe or one of her minions would try and locate her by breaking into their line of communication. Alitheia and Jo were deep empathis; Lethe was not in their league but she had some ability and would undoubtedly use it. And Sebastian was rumoured to have mysterious talents other than driving cars so Jo knew she would have to be careful.

Being careful was easier said than done. While awake, Jo had pretty good emp control, but strong emotions like fear or joy would call out almost unbidden – and anything could happen in dreams. Ali had explained about shields, and privacy and tact from the very beginning. 'Don't go poking about in people's thoughts,' her mother had warned. 'It's invitation only.' Even so, there were embarrassing times when Jo accidentally blundered into someone's mind and was startled by what she saw – rather like catching your parents kissing. The thought that her own private observations might be visible to someone else was worrying and becoming more so as she neared adolescence.

As the car crawled past Jo raised her head and risked a look. She was shocked to see that her aunt was driving. Of Sebastian there was no sign. Where was he? Watching her home in case she doubled back? Hurting her parents? Searching for her in these very woods? She felt clutches of heart-stopping panic as she clambered to her feet. She realised that she could not risk going back home. She had to go on.

With shaking hands she took a warm sweater from her rucksack, and found a waterproof in her saddlebag. She checked the money in her purse and was glad she'd saved so hard for the trip to Paris. She rubbed mud over the reflectors and hoped she wouldn't meet much traffic.

At the moment Jo only had one thought – to get to the railway station. Only a few trains stopped there, but

Jo felt that the train was the best way of putting distance between her and Aunt Lethe. In just over half an hour she could be in London. With that thought in mind she emerged from the forest and onto the road. She kept as close to the trees as possible, trying to be invisible among the shadows, hoping that the last train hadn't gone.

As she pedalled, her mother emped her – just a flash of sound – too quick for a tracker to trace. It sounded like the letter **N**. Jo guessed that her mum was going to try and spell a destination without giving the game away to any eavesdroppers. There was no place nearby that began with N so Jo was puzzled. Maybe it was M. The next flash was more confusing – the letter **W**. Was Ali trying to get her to travel North West? The word *nowhere* kept intruding on her thoughts. Did she mean that nowhere was safe?

Jo was so engrossed trying to work this out that she nearly cycled into her aunt's parked car. Lethe had guessed her niece would head for the station, and was checking the timetable at the station entrance when the moon came out and Jo saw the car in the nick of time. Once again she vanished into the trees.

Another flash – **One**.

Jo was thinking furiously. No-one? Could that mean trust no-one? She had no real idea what her mother was trying to say, although she did understand that she should not go home yet. The two letters and one number made no sense so she put that to one side, and concentrated.

She really wanted to get to London – it would be easier to hide in the city. With Lethe watching the station approach and no buses or coaches this late the last resort was hitching a lift. Jo weighed up the dangers of hitching against the risk of being caught by Sebastian or Lethe and decided against it. She wondered whether to cycle to the next station but it was a long way and if she hadn't already missed the last train, then she probably would while she was on her way there. If only she could remember the train times.

How she wished her father could empathise! He knew so much about trains that he was always teased by Ali and Jo for his train spotter tendencies. Thinking of him, Jo was sick with worry. Whatever had her aunt done to him?

She thought back to the argument. 'I remember it well,' her father had said bitterly. 'And I wish I didn't.'

'Done,' said Aunt Lethe evenly and triumphant. 'My pleasure. You only had to ask.'

And then her mother screaming. 'Paul! What have you done to him, Lethe? What have you done?'

After that there was no sound from her father.

Jo would have given anything now to hear him rambling on about spiral escalators, deep level shelters and mercury arc rectifiers. His passion for old London Underground stations had been hard to share, until the special day, her last birthday, when he took her on their Great Adventure.

Tears sprang to Jo's eyes as she remembered. She thought back to their amazing journey and as she did, she suddenly realised what she was going to do. Her spirits lifted as her plan took shape. She was going to walk to London, but not along the roads. She wondered about phoning Samantha, to get a message to Ali and Paul, but just thinking about what might happen if Sebastian found her friend was too disturbing. Not only that, there was no phone box for miles. The sensible part of her thought that maybe it was just as well; she didn't want to risk putting her friend in danger. As for the non-sensible part of her, well, that felt a bit quivery and alone. So quivery Jo had a little weep, then sensible Jo wiped her eyes and concentrated on planning.

Jo's plan meant going back towards her home. She could stay in the woods, and put up with the bumpy, bone-shaking ride, or take a chance and get back onto the road. The smoothness of the road seemed almost irresistible, but in the end she chose the woods for their cover.

Under normal circumstances she would only have gone into the woods in daylight or with a friend. She

and Sam had walked through these same woods, telling each other ghost stories and revelling in being scared witless. Together. But now her head was filled with the need to escape from Lethe and get help for her parents. She was fuelled with anger and determination. She should have felt scared and tired, at the very least cold and hungry, but she didn't. She felt powerful. The forest was her shelter and kept her safe. The night noises of startled birds, the occasional shriek of a small creature being caught up in ruthless, sharp talons, the faint sound of traffic in the distance; all hardly registered as she kept moving.

Eight. Another flash. Jo was still baffled. How she longed to signal back to her mother. How she longed to know what was happening. But she dared not risk keeping the link open for more than a moment.

At last, ahead of her the trees were thinning out. In the moonlight she could see well enough. There was the lane and fence she remembered, and there the gap her father had shown her. 'All this was sealed as tight as a drum before the Riots', he had told her. 'But there are ways through for those who know what they are looking for.'

Jo hid her bike in some scrubby bushes, and squeezed through the gap in the fence. She was at the top of a steep embankment. A long way below were railway lines, signals and discarded engines, their metal surfaces silver in the moonlight.

Ali emp'd her again – but Jo wasn't sure if she'd heard the letter ***A*** or the number ***Eight***. There was a short pause as Jo contemplated the difficult climb down, then more emps. Four sounds this time, in quick succession. Jo sensed her mother's anxiety and urgency. The letter ***F*** – or was it ***S***? Then something she couldn't make out at all, followed by ***Eskimo***, and ***End***. The word *End* told her that that was all there was. She felt as if something in her heart had been shut down. She had started to look forward to these scraps, even though she could make no sense of them.

No time to think about it now. She scrambled down, dislodging small stones as she went. The noise was

unnerving in the quiet of the night but as she reached the bottom, silence returned and she could breathe again.

She was standing in a long disused railway siding. Decrepit old trains were stored there, rusting hulks with broken windows and doors hanging off their hinges. Anything of any value had long been looted by the Rioters.

Jo listened as hard as she ever had in her life. She was checking to see if she was alone, and every sense told her she was. She was torn between going on, and resting for a while. As she stood there, she realised she was bone-tired. The energy that had kept her going had drained away and she longed to close her eyes, just for a little while.

She climbed into the nearest carriage, curled up in a dry corner where many years of autumn leaves had blown in to make a soft place for her to lie and was asleep in moments.

Chapter Two – Forgotten Tunnels

Matthew Jameson was expecting visitors. He was glad of the advance warning – it gave him time to put on the kettle and tidy up a bit. He moved slowly round the kitchen, startled to realise that night had come already. Where had the day gone? Come to that, where had all the days gone? Time was moving so quickly now and his body was tired to the bone. What had he done today? Woke up, washed, dressed, fed the cat, had breakfast, washed the dishes, read the paper with Sergeant purring on his lap. Lunch was a sandwich and then, with the afternoon sun shining in through a window that badly needed cleaning, he sat with Sergeant in the comfy old brown leather armchair that badly needed mending and had a fragrant pipe and a good long think.

'Old man's memories, Sergeant,' he'd said, and the well-loved old cat purred to hear his favourite human voice. 'Glory days and gory days. Battles lost and won. The wickedness and the wonder.'

Once he had shifted adventure on the wind, laughed when danger came calling, gambled it all for a woman's smile, held new life in his arms and watched the light fade from the eyes of those he loved as well as some he hated. He had been a son, a brother, a comrade, an explorer, a lover, a father, a guide; a man balancing power with restraint. Now he was put out to grass like a tired old racehorse, living on his memories, waiting for the end and hoping it would be swift. No-one needed anything from him anymore. Until tonight.

She had been one of his favourite pupils. She came into her powers carefully. She considered consequences and she grew in wisdom. She learned to love and she learned to live with pain. When she visited, she never seemed to notice that his skin, once golden, now seemed grey; that his sharp, intelligent eyes were veiled and moist; that his hair was sparse and his back stooped. She didn't just see his mind, still sharp, still deep, still open to the universe. She saw his soul. She saw him.

And now she was afraid.



Some people believe they can control their dreams. Jo was not one of them. She slept deeply, and she dreamed deeply. Fragments of the quarrel came back to her – her mother's voice, full of anger and disbelief. 'What have you done to him, Lethe? What have you done?' Her aunt, so lovely and, it seemed, so lethal. Then in the dream she was doing normal things – listening to music, playing with the kittens, laughing with her friends. But all the time a sinister shadow was stalking her.

Suddenly the music changed, and the beat of the music became the beating of her heart. Shadowy figures crouched round an Indian campfire. Orange and gold sparks flew up into the dark sky. In the pearly light of a full moon her mother, aunt and grandmother were standing in front of a pyramid shaped tent, smiling and beckoning her forward. A holy man raised a red-painted buffalo skull high above his head, silhouetted by the moon. She saw a sullen boy, about her age, with jet black hair. His dark eyes smouldered with anger as he stared into the fire. An insistent drumbeat drew her towards them. Then in a moment the shadow obliterated them and she was alone. Ragged shadow fingers clutched at her and she was running, running for dear life.

With no warning she was on the edge of an abyss and began falling for what seemed like forever, twisting and turning in slow motion, entangled in the rags and tatters of the velvety, suffocating darkness. High above the cold, white moon mocked her. All she could hear was the rushing air as she fell, faster now. It seemed like forever before she landed on a soft bed of dry autumn leaves.

When she looked up, all she could see was the moon, hanging huge above her, so close she could have touched it. She could hear faint cries of distress, but it wasn't her. She could smell stale cigarette smoke. She woke completely. The moon became the fish-belly white face of Sebastian.

'You see,' he said in a conversational tone, as if they were resuming talking after an interruption, 'there are certain kinds of dreams that I can... what shall we say... penetrate. And then I can trace the dreamer. So here we are. And look who's here as well.'

Jo felt sick. Sebastian was holding a wire basket, and inside, with her ears flattened and her eyes wide with fear, was Calico. The cries of distress were louder now. 'Give her to me,' demanded Jo.

'Well, I don't know about that,' said Sebastian. 'The way I see it, we need to come to an agreement. And you seem to me like a very disagreeable child indeed, so I need a little leverage. Which is where this spiteful creature comes into the equation.'

Jo could see that his hands had been recently savaged. She felt glad for a moment, but it was short-lived.

'Now, for reasons best known to herself, your aunt wants to take you with her to Paris. As it is my job to ensure your aunt gets what she wants, I intend to get you to her. Whatever it takes.'

'I'm not going anywhere with you,' said Jo, with a defiance she did not feel.

'Oh, I think you are, Johanna. Because if you don't, Calico won't be going anywhere either and there will be some very hungry kittens. How long does it take for a kitten to starve to death, I wonder?'

'My mother will feed them,' said Jo, trying not to cry.

'Well, yes, under normal circumstances. But she's a bit tied up just now, so to speak. And your father's too far gone to be much use... Ah, but you've no idea what's been going on, have you. Right now, the kittens are the last thing on your mother's mind. I made sure the knots were good and tight.'

'What happened to Dad?' asked Jo. In spite of herself her voice shook with fear. 'What did Aunt Lethe do?'

'She wiped him,' said Sebastian laconically. 'He asked for it. Now, are we going back peacefully, or shall I just throw this basket in a skip and drag you?'

'You win,' said Jo sulkily. 'Let me have the basket, though.'

'Please.'

'Please let me have the basket.'

He laughed triumphantly and thrust the basket at her.

Jo scrambled out of the carriage, whispering gently to Calico as she did. She was surprised to see that morning had come. A pale dawn was breaking and the rain had stopped. She wondered if she could make a run for it, but Sebastian kept close behind her. They were walking towards the embankment when they heard a shout.

'Oi! What are you up to? You're trespassing.'

They turned round to see a workman coming towards them, dressed in a donkey jacket and overalls.

'No tricks,' whispered Sebastian. Jo nodded dumbly.

'Good morning!' he called in an easy, friendly manner. 'I've been looking for my cat. We only just moved here, and she did a runner last night. My very good neighbour Jo had the bright idea of looking here, and voila! Here's the cat, safe and sound.' He pointed to the basket.

In spite of herself, Jo was impressed with his quick thinking. There were a number of ways he could have blown it with an explanation which didn't ring true, and he'd avoided them. Even so, the man looked suspicious. He came closer and spoke directly to Jo.

'Is that right, Miss?' Reluctantly, Jo nodded. He looked at her more closely. His eyes were amazingly shrewd. 'You look familiar,' he said. 'Must have seen you around. You sure you're O.K?'

How Jo longed to tell him the truth. He looked kind, tough and reliable. But she didn't dare risk Calico and the kittens. Of one thing she was quite certain. Sebastian would destroy them as easily as he would swat a fly. 'I'm fine,' she lied. 'I was worried about the cat, that's all.'

He grinned, said goodbye and went back towards a tumble-down wooden hut. Jo wanted to call after him, but instead, with a heavy heart she followed Sebastian.

Coming down the embankment had been relatively easy, but the climb up was incredibly difficult. After the rain the ground was muddy and slippery. Sebastian was soon out of breath. 'Serves him right for smoking,' thought Jo spitefully as she overtook him. Then she had an idea, and began scrabbling her way to the top as quickly as she possibly could. As she went she whispered to Calico, and loosened the catch on the basket. She reached the top and bent down.

'What are you up to?' demanded Sebastian, wheezing and still climbing the steep slope. His view of her was partly blocked by a bush.

She opened the basket and whispered to Calico, 'Go home.' To her everlasting relief, the poor, terrified cat, desperate to get back to her kittens, took off in the right direction.

Sebastian's voice was nearer now. He sounded angry as well as breathless. 'I said; *What are you up to?*

Jo straightened up as his head and shoulders appeared. 'This,' she said, and with all the force she could muster, she swung the cat basket into his face. With a cry he toppled backwards. She didn't stop to look what happened but ran as fast as she could back down the embankment, skimming and sliding as she ran until with a flurry of stones and twigs she reached the bottom.

She ran towards the wooden hut. The workman came out, his face full of questions.

'I need to get into the tunnel,' she gasped. 'I explored it last year with my Dad.'

'I remember,' he said. 'Tall, dark-haired fellow with a great big grin. Train spotter, right?'

Jo winced. 'That's him, but he prefers railroad historian!'

He motioned her towards a grating. 'I'm Reg. You could say I'm in charge round here. You in some kind of trouble?'

She nodded, then said quickly, 'I haven't done anything wrong.'

He grunted and laughed. 'Me neither.'

The grating swung open and they hurried inside. Reg put the grille back in place and they moved into the shadows. 'Didn't like the look of that bloke,' he whispered. 'So what's the crack, girlie?'

Jo had no idea where to begin, or how much to say. She was anxious to get as far away from Sebastian as possible. She was relieved he didn't seem to be coming after her. She wondered if he had broken his neck. A day ago she would have been horrified by such a thought, now she just felt glad that she, and Calico, had escaped him.

'I need to get to London.'

Reg scratched his chin thoughtfully. 'And I take it you want to get there without that moon-faced geezer knowing?'

Jo nodded. 'Yes, I'm going to follow the old underground train tracks.'

'That won't work. A lot of it has collapsed since the last time you were here. The whole area is unsafe.'

'But I've got to get to London!'

Reg heard the urgency in her voice. 'There is a way, but it means going through the Deep Level Shelter, and that's Feral territory now.'

'I don't have any other choice.'

Reg came to a decision. 'Well, you're not going on your own then. I'm coming with you.'

A wave of relief swept over Jo. She instinctively trusted him. 'Thank you.'

'Let's be off and you can tell me all about it along the way.' With that, Reg pulled a slim pen-torch from his work-belt, switched it on and set off into the darkness. 'Are you coming or not, girlie?'

'My name's Jo, actually,' she said, racing to catch up.

'Well then, Jo, do you want to tell me why the VMN are after you?'

Jo stopped. How did he know that?

Reg smiled. 'Don't worry, girlie, I didn't emp you. Moon-face has VMN written all over him.'

Jo looked at him for a moment as a thought came to her. She spoke timidly. 'Are you one of the Rioters?'

'That's what they call us.' Reg snorted contemptuously. 'We started off as The Righteous, but that Lacuna woman twisted the name.'

Jo froze.

'Just like she twists everything.' Reg went on.

'You mean Lethe Lacuna, don't you?' stated Jo in a small voice. 'That's my aunt.'

The look of horror on Reg's face made her heart sink.

'Lethe Lacuna,' repeated Reg. 'Tell me you are joking.'

Jo shook her head. 'I'm afraid not. She's at my house. She's the one who sent Sebastian after me.'

Reg's face was ashen. 'If that woman is anywhere near here my people are in danger. I need to warn them straight away.' He looked her up and down. 'I can't take you with me to our hideout. The others would have my guts for garters.' He was obviously wracked with uncertainty. 'But I can't leave you here either.'

'Can't you emp them?'

'That's not what I do.'

Jo thought for a moment. 'I'll stay here. You do what you have to do and then come back.'

Reg looked doubtful.

'Don't worry. I'll be O.K.'

Reg was clearly torn. Jo hastened to reassure him. 'I'll be fine. Just get going!'

'I can't leave you here on your own in the dark!'

'Then leave me your torch. I'll be alright. I've been here before, with my Dad, remember?'

Reg came to a decision. 'OK. This is how it's going to be. You stay right here.' He handed her the torch. He still looked worried. 'Here, look after my sandwiches. Help yourself if you get hungry. Is there anything else you need?'

Jo laughed. 'Reg! Will you stop fussing and get going?'

'You win. Now, don't move from this spot and I'll be back in no time flat. I'll lock the grating behind me; it's the only way in so Moon-face won't be coming after

you. When I get back, I'll whistle *Pop, Goes the Weasel* so you'll know it's me. Stay right here and I'll be back in ten minutes.'

Jo relaxed. 'OK.'

'Oh, and if Crazy Em appears, just say you're with me,' called Reg over his shoulder.

'Who's Crazy Em?' cried Jo.

But Reg was gone.

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Chapter Three – Going Underground

Once Reg was gone, and the grille safely secured, Jo sat silently in the shadows, gathering her thoughts. She suddenly felt very small and alone.

Tears were close and she blinked angrily. She shook herself and concentrated on trying to understand her mother's coded messages. She thought about it as she gratefully ate the cheese and pickle sandwich undoubtedly meant for Reg's lunch. By the time she'd finished eating she was none the wiser. Clearly her mother meant to baffle anyone who did manage to listen in but right now Jo was completely stumped as well. She took her notebook out of her rucksack and wrote the messages down.

Eskimo was easy enough. Something to do with Bob Dylan's song *Quinn, the Eskimo*. Trust All to use her favourite musician in her code. Jo emphatically did not share her mother's passion, but her enforced knowledge, from the cradle on, of his admittedly rather amazing lyrics had found a place in her head, if not her heart.

After grappling with the combination of letters and numbers for a while Jo gave up trying to work it out. She hoped that inspiration would come when she was thinking about something entirely different.

All she seemed to have were questions and no answers. What had happened to her father? Sebastian said he had been 'wiped'. What did that mean? Where were her parents now? What had Lethe done to make her father so angry and was it connected to whatever so clearly spooked Reg? What had happened to Sebastian, and if he was still alive, how could she keep him out of her dreams? Did Calico make it back to her kittens? How much longer was Reg going to be?

Jo had lost all track of time. She had been sitting still for so long that her feet had gone to sleep. She got to her feet and stamped about, trying to get rid of the pins and needles. What was keeping Reg?

Having got to her feet, Jo was impatient to be off.

'Reg told me not to move,' she said to herself. She stared into the gloom for a while, and began to count.

'One Mississippi... two Mississippi... three Mississippi... '



'Six hundred Mississippi.'

Jo shivered. Something had obviously gone wrong.

Reluctantly she realised she needed to keep moving.

'Reg will catch me up,' she told herself as she moved deeper into the tunnel.

She was so grateful for the torch, but as soon as she turned it on she could tell there wasn't much life left in the battery. 'Mustn't be wasteful,' she thought to herself. 'A quick flash to get my bearings, then blackout.'

She walked for a very long time along the tunnel, which smelt musty and sooty. There was no sign of Reg. Her best guess was that she had been walking for about two hours. Jo and her dad had cycled through the tunnel for as long as possible – perhaps eight miles – before continuing by foot. The railway tracks were long gone which dealt with the rather pressing fear of electrocution.

The previous Christmas Jo had given her dad a brilliant torch which, if the battery failed, could be wound up. And it had a radio. She was so pleased that he'd brought it along on that special day. Thinking about her father then, striding along full of confidence, perfectly at ease in this subterranean world and so pleased with his present to her, made her suddenly feel very afraid for him.

Jo put on as brave a face as she could, then she remembered Calico and her kittens, and the brave face was washed away. *It's always the little things*, her mother used to say. As Jo remembered those words she realised how she longed to tune into Ali – her warmth and common-sense and generosity lit up her surroundings. If only she, Paul and Jo were all together in this dark, cold, fusty tunnel....

Jo made herself stop thinking about Ali. It was too dangerous – her deep emotions might set up an

automatic connection. She concentrated instead on remembering the things her dad had said. She was sure she was close to the place where they had left their bikes and she remembered there was a tunnel off to the left which she'd need to follow. Every now and then she risked the torch as she searched for the side tunnel. Rather sooner than she had expected she came to an archway, and entered cautiously. The main tunnel had seemed dark enough; this one was ink-black.

The darkness was almost suffocating. Jo tried to breathe deeply and regularly, but a deep fear and dread unnerved her. Her memories of the route seemed hazy now. She was looking for a metal door, but was it on the left or right? If only she had a map!

'Get a grip, Johanna,' she said to herself sternly. 'It was the left.'

She shone the torch into the blackness. It was almost worse than useless, a smudge of light overwhelmed by shadow.

Unable to see, Jo became acutely aware of small sounds, water dripping, little skittering noises. Her heightened senses imagined squeaks and whiskers, twitching noses and long segmented tails. Rats. She pressed herself against the tunnel wall, with her arms outspread, and inched her way along, feeling for the metal door she hoped would soon materialise.

Jo could almost taste the soot. She began to imagine she was swimming in soot, breathing it in, almost drinking it. There were no more colours any more, just a thousand shades of black and the torchlight was fading fast. And where, in this world of darkness, was the door? It should be right here!

Now she was truly frightened. Great waves of fear made her body tremble. Her breathing was jagged. She couldn't stop shaking. She felt so weak and faint she could not stand and she sank to her knees in despair. Racking sobs shuddered from her until she had no more tears and the silence surged back around her.

Jo had lost all sense of time. The tunnel seemed to go on forever. When she had been with her dad, the time had gone so quickly. Just as she and Samantha

enjoyed scaring themselves silly by telling ghost stories on their midnight walks, so she and her father had competed to make the hairs on the back of their necks stand up. They made up stories of ghosts like the jilted girl who jumped to her death onto the live track and ever after haunted the platform calling for her faithless lover. Jo invented a gruesome murder and Paul trumped that by telling her that many people believed there were subterranean troglodytes who colonised the deepest levels of the city, living their misbegotten lives without ever seeing the light of day.

'Long, long ago the worst criminals, the truly desperate rags and tags of London slums took shelter underground,' he said, speaking in a mock-sinister growl, 'and they survived – just – and evolved – more or less – breeding like vermin and behaving worse. They are pale and spindly. Like plants that never see the sun.' As she remembered, Jo thought of Sebastian and shuddered. She stood up, wanting to get as far away from him as possible.

Jo had lost her bearings completely. She groped her way along the tunnel, and came to a metal ladder. She remembered exploring with her dad – they had gone down a ladder, so down she went. Now she was in another tunnel, with a low ceiling and she moved forwards carefully.

In the darkness every tiny sound seemed extra loud as the sense of hearing compensated for the lack of vision. A sudden scrabbling noise made Jo jump out of her skin and she shone the torch in the direction of the sound. As she did so, the failing batteries finally gave up the ghost and died, but not before she saw a dozen or so bright eyes staring at her. Rats.

A wave of revulsion swept over her as she imagined the rats surrounding her, swarming over her. She fled, running recklessly, her rasping breath echoing around her.

Suddenly the ground opened under her and she fell straight down into nothingness. Instinctively she flung her arms wide, and her fall was checked with a jarring crash as her full weight landed on her elbows. She had

fallen into a hole. Her legs were dangling helplessly, and far below her was the sound of water moving slowly. The smell of stagnation made her gorge rise. Her arms hurt with the effort of stopping her fall.

Slowly, painstakingly, she eased her body back up and out of the hole. The metal edge of the opening scraped and skinned her arms and legs. She remembered now where she was – in the sump room. When she came with Paul there had been a heavy metal trapdoor covering the hole. Now she waited to catch her breath, felt around until she found the trapdoor, and pulled it back over the hole. She knocked against a cold, metal container and remembered there were some tanks which had been used to pump sewage to a sewer on the surface.

She felt shaken and sick as she returned to the tunnel, close to fainting. She began to picture herself from a long way away – looking down on her limpet self as it crept along the tunnel wall. The wall was uneven and rough. She skinned her knuckles on a loose brick. Even her blood tasted of soot. Now her shoulders were aching with the effort of keeping her arms extended. She shifted position, bringing her hands closer together.

Suddenly there was no more wall beneath her hands. She stumbled and fell to her knees and pitched forward into nothingness. At last! This must be the doorway she'd been searching for.

Too tired to stand, she just crawled forwards. Beneath her the floor was wet in places and there was a stale, smoky smell. Something she hoped was water dripped onto the back of her neck. She felt so thirsty she was tempted to cup some in her hands and drink it, but she was too scared to try in case it wasn't water.

Jo was so exhausted she thought she had no more fear left in her. Then her hand touched something slimy and slippery. She screamed and tried to straighten up but her head banged on the ceiling and she fell onto her face, stunned almost senseless, the sound of her own scream ringing in her ears.

It took a while for Jo to make sense of what had happened. She had a splitting headache and it was hard to think clearly but she realised she was not in a tunnel at all, but a large pipe. She had taken a wrong turning, and was hopelessly lost. There was no chance of Reg finding her now. She needed to go back to the main tunnel.

It was hard to turn round in the confined space. As she wriggled round her hand slid on an oily puddle. She recoiled and lurched backwards, grateful that her rucksack broke her fall.

Then she heard the voice. A man's voice, thin and scratchy, just behind her, was wheezing in urgent desperation. 'Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!'

Jo had never moved so fast in her life. Tiredness and fear were forgotten, replaced by raw terror. Within moments she was out of the pipe and running back the way she had come. The voice continued, shockingly close. 'But someone still was yelling out and stumbling, and floundering like a man in fire or lime...'

Jo could hardly hear the voice for the banging of her heart, the pounding of blood in her ears. Her footsteps were loud, echoing through the tunnel as she ran. Her footsteps. But why could she not hear his?

Perhaps she was picking up a message from a ghost – some long dead construction worker killed in a terrible accident when a tunnel caved in and deadly gas seeped into his lungs?

She stopped and listened. Still the voice came, despairing now. 'Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light, as under a green sea, I saw him drowning.'

She turned round to try and see who was following her. But the haunted voice still came from behind her! She turned again. Still behind her. Such a sad voice. 'In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.'

The words moved Jo to tears. The terror ebbed away and her head began to clear. And then she knew. There was no-one behind her. But in her rucksack was her mum's ancient Walkman, with a recording of

Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est*. Jo had an essay to write on the poets of World War One, and Ali had found a cassette she'd studied when she was at school. Jo's fall backwards must have knocked the Play button. Relief washed over her.

'Don't waste the batteries,' she thought, turning off the Walkman, then laughed out loud as inspiration struck. At last! A lucky break. 'Let there be light,' she said, and within moments the batteries from the Walkman, thankfully the right size, were replacing the ones in Reg's torch. It was so good to be able to see clearly again, even though the torchlight had that yellow tinge that told her these batteries weren't as new as she'd hoped.

Jo had no sense of anyone around, so she took the opportunity to go through her rucksack, clean up a bit and put on more layers of clothing. She looked at her brand new jeans, bought specially for the trip, and couldn't bring herself to wear them now among all the dust and soot, so they stayed where they were.

As Jo reassembled the Walkman she had the idea of putting her holiday money in the now empty battery compartment. Seemed like a good hiding place.

As she repacked her things she found her diary. She read yesterday's entry. Just one word. Heavily underlined, with lots of exclamation marks. **PARIS!!!!** She smiled wryly at the thought of what she would write today.

Jo was just about to put her diary back in the rucksack when a sudden thought made her heart skip a beat. What had she written on her birthday? She skimmed through the pages, and there, to her everlasting relief, was an account of her journey in the tunnels. And even better, there was a sketch map. More good fortune! She studied it carefully.

It was obvious now that she had turned off the main tunnel too quickly. She carried on further, in much better spirits now she could see more clearly. She came to an opening, and was confident this was the right place.

Once in the side tunnel she checked the sketch map in her diary. Sure enough, there should be a metal door up ahead to the left and she felt her way cautiously, using the torch in flashes just to see the way ahead. 'Like Mum's emps,' thought Jo. 'Little flashes.' She wondered if she dared risk sending a flash to Ali, just to say she was OK. Just one little word. As quickly as she possibly could she emped. **Safe.**

A voice exploded in her head. A voice she had never heard. An old, brittle, angry voice. **Who are you, emp-girl?** Jo desperately tried to shield but the voice came again. **What are you doing in my domain?**

Jo stopped in her tracks – shivering with fear. She couldn't think for terror. The voice taunted her. **Scared of an old woman? Heard stories about Crazy Em, have you?**

Jo tried to pull herself together. **I mean no harm.**

The old woman laughed sardonically **Doesn't stop harm happening, emp-girl. Why should I trust you?**

Jo's memory dealt her an ace. She signalled boldly. **Reg sent me.** There was a silence. Jo felt the terror ebb away a little. She adopted a formal manner. **Do I have your permission to proceed?**

I suppose so. But be careful in the Deep Level Shelter. Can't count on emping. The signal's patchy.

Jo felt a shiver of apprehension.

Just keep your wits about you. Oh, and mind the step!

Jo had reached the doorway. At last. The metal door was buckled with only just enough room to squeeze through. Mindful of Crazy Em's warning she went forward cautiously. She shone her torch briefly, and felt sick as she saw she was at the top of a steep flight of stone steps. The protective guard rail was gone and there was a stomach-churning drop into the darkness. Jo gasped. Her head swam. She could have plunged crashing down, a bag of skin and bones, hitting each step. Breaking. Breaking. Broken. She imagined her body, battered and bleeding, lying like a sack of

rubbish at the bottom of the stairwell. No-one she loved would know where she was.

Jo had never felt so frightened. She had to keep reminding herself that it had not happened, and hopefully never would, thanks to Crazy Em. Jo struggled to remember her manners. ***Thanks for the warning.*** There was no reply.

Jo knew there was an old ticket office and store rooms nearby. There were also lift shafts, but they were de-commissioned ages ago. She began the long, steep descent, thinking longingly of modern escalators that could take you deep underground in seconds. 'What is wrong with these steps?' she wondered. 'There's barely room for my feet.' Another flash of the torch reminded her that she was on a spiral staircase. She moved across so she was descending on the broadest part of the step and kept contact with the wall as she inched downwards.

Jo tried not to think how quickly the light of the torch had faded. The steps seemed to go on forever. With her dad, it had been scary but fun – now it was misery. And very, very cold. To comfort herself, she tried to remember their conversation. He had told her how spiral staircases in castles were supposed to be built to give the occupants an advantage over any intruders. If the family was upstairs in the solar enjoying a drop of medieval mead, bukkenade and sweet beetroot pie and heard noises downstairs, then they could trip nimbly down the spiral staircase with their sword arm free. She remembered that spiral staircases in castles belonging to the Kerr family in Scotland turned the other way because the Kerr clan was predominantly left-handed. Jo and her father had a mock duel on these very steps, trying to prove the point one way or another.

Once again she wished she could emp her dad, but it wasn't one of his skills. His particular talent lay in locating things, often before anyone even knew they were lost. He used to laugh at Ali and Jo as they emp'd each other so effortlessly. He called Jo 'My little Empress.' Jo stifled a sob at the thought. She never

doubted his love, but she always felt that her dad was bewildered by his family. He liked solid things – facts, machinery, buildings. Emotions and words did not come easily to him, but when she was in hospital with appendicitis, he had written her a short letter. It just said, *Jo, I hold you safe in my heart.* The tiny scrap of paper was kept safe in her great-grandmother's silver locket and she was never parted from it.

She touched the locket now, for courage to go on into the darkness. The steps seemed to wind forever, and cobwebs brushed her face as she kept close to the wall. The torch light was fading fast, but a short burst of light showed her, at last, that there were just a few steps to go before she reached the ground. Once there, she remembered a corridor leading to the platform.

The temperature changed dramatically. Jo shivered as the colder air hit her. There was a musty smell, and every now and again the sound of trains rumbling nearby. It felt odd to realise that elsewhere, life was going on as normal.

She could see the entrances to the lift shafts, and looking up, could see the bottom of the lifts themselves, wedged with girders so they would never move again. Her dad's voice came back to her.

'They sank two lift shafts, side by side. There were doors at the back of each lift, so if you were in one and it got stuck, the other one could come alongside, you'd open the connecting doors, and go across into the working lift. Brilliant!' His enthusiasm for the ingenious, old technology was infectious and Jo grinned, remembering how boyish he had looked.

In places the lovely old tiles could still be seen, shining cream and Victorian Green. Most had long been prised off the wall by souvenir hunters and home decorators. Jo could imagine the station in its heyday, with a busy staff and passengers setting off and returning in a continuous yet ever-changing loop. She thought of the men who had created the tunnels, working in terrible conditions to feed London's insatiable hunger for change and movement. Ancient maps had been used so the miners could avoid the pits

where corpses had been thrown during The Great Plague of 1665. The fear that the virus could be re-activated and released was very strong. Thinking about the Plague reminded Jo of the rats.

Just a little further on Jo could see the opening onto the platform. She dragged her feet a little – the corridor felt enclosed and relatively safe – once on the platform she would be more exposed. Feeling like a soldier behind enemy lines, she crept carefully along to the end of the passageway and peered round the corner.

She nearly fainted with shock. There was a train standing at the platform! Her heart was pounding so fast, and the blood clamoured in her head so loudly she thought someone was banging on the wall behind her.

The silver train shimmered in the torch light like a ghost. The Marie Celeste of the Underground. Its doors were wide open and there were unearthly glows from a few emergency lights. Jo inched out onto the platform, listening all the time for evidence of other people. The only sounds were faint rumbles of other trains in the distance. The one she was looking at was going nowhere. She wondered when and why it had appeared – when she came with her father the platform was empty. 'They sometimes bring trains in for films, or music videos,' said her father's voice in her head. 'Or they store them until they can be scrapped.'

Jo suddenly remembered something else he had said. She briefly shone the torch at the base of the wall where it met the platform, then turned off the light. A faint green line glowed the length of the platform – a guide line painted with luminous paint. So many people had taken shelter in the Underground stations during the Blitz – she wondered if any of them felt as comforted as she did by the sight of that line.

Jo could see where cigarette and chocolate machines had been attached to the walls. She tried not to think about chocolate. There had also been weighing machines and stamp machines, according to her dad. Posters for magazines, shoes and art exhibitions still adorned the walls, torn and tattered, twisting when occasional gusts of wind whooshed along the tunnel.

Jo looked inside the train. She realised she hoped she'd find something useful, though what, she couldn't imagine. There were some crushed beer cans and an almost empty bottle of Coke on a seat. A pile of food wrappers was nearby – any crumbs were long gone. Jo opened the Coke bottle and sniffed cautiously. It smelled fine. In fact it smelled wonderful. Jo's mouth was so dry she threw caution to the winds and savoured the last few sweet drops of the tepid, flat liquid as they trickled down her parched throat. If only there had been more! Like a scavenger she scoured the train but found nothing else.

Back on the platform, Jo kept walking. She noticed stalactites had formed on the ceiling of the tunnel. She wondered where Crazy Em was, and tried not to think about what might be in the Deep Shelter.

Jo was nearly at the end of the platform when she came across the blockage Reg had told her about. Although she dreaded going down to the Deep Level Shelter, she recognised she was lucky to have an alternative route. She found a corridor which seemed to lead to a blank wall. She was looking for a doorway on the left of that corridor and felt her way along the wall until she reached the place she remembered. Her heart sank as she realised that the heavy metal door was gone. Someone had blocked the entrance with junk they'd collected on the platform – litter bins and bits of broken machinery; all of it heavy and unwieldy. The way down was completely blocked.

Chapter Four – The Deep Level Shelter

Jo's hopes were dashed. She felt tired, and hungry and thirsty. She was cold, lonely and frightened. She knew she must be filthy and longed for a wash and a wee. With her back to the wall, she slid down to the ground and just sat, crying big splashy tears of frustration and self-pity. She felt utterly defeated and just wanted to curl up where she was, go to sleep and not bother waking up. The journey so far had been frightening enough and she knew that there was worse to come. What had been scarily thrilling and fun with her dad was terrifying now she was on her own.

As she slumped there, the tears drying on her grubby face, Jo felt an overwhelming urge to close her eyes. Just a little nap,' she thought, then she sat bolt upright. 'I mustn't!' she said out loud and fierce. Her voice echoed round the walls and she clamped her hand to her mouth. 'What if I dream, and Sebastian tracks me?' The realisation that she dare not fall asleep made her long to do so even more. Her eyelids felt so heavy, and her bones so weary. Her head was aching from hunger and the dark velvet of sweet sleep beckoned her enticingly.

Jo was fighting to stay awake but her eyelids were drooping with fatigue and strain; her limbs ached from the cycling and walking and cried out for rest. She was beginning to float, to drift away, when a tiny noise, hardly more than a scrap of sound, made her suddenly completely alert. She held her breath and tried to disappear into the shadows. The noise came again, a little louder; a little nearer.

A bright, beady eye regarded her thoughtfully. The owner's head was cocked to one side enquiringly. Relief washed over Jo in waves. She wanted to laugh and laugh, but that would have frightened the watcher. Instead she found the paper bag that had held Reg's sandwich, and shook the crumbs out.

Her companion made short work of the crumbs, and looked hopefully for more. 'That's it, mate. Sorry,' said Jo, taking in a scrawny body supported on legs that

were little more than pink, gnarled stumps. She remembered from her last visit that London had seemed overrun with deformed pigeons. She was a tender-hearted girl and it troubled her.

Everyone said pigeons were pests, but Jo was so pleased to see this one it could have been a phoenix. Her tiredness vanished, as after a while did the pigeon, clumping unevenly off down the platform. Jo watched it go, and hoped it would soon find something else to eat. The brief encounter heartened her immensely.

Then she studied the blocked doorway. 'It's been blocked from this side,' she said out loud. 'So is that to stop people going on, or to stop something down there getting out?' That was not a reassuring thought. She squared her shoulders. 'Well, it's the only way, so I'd better get started.' Funny how comforting the sound of a human voice could be – even if it was just her speaking to herself. She thought about emping Crazy Em while she was still on the higher level, but decided against it. Em's voice had not encouraged idle chatter.

Jo set to systematically clearing the entrance to the tunnel leading to the Deep Level Shelter. As she worked she remembered her dad telling her how ten shelters had been planned.

'Back in the 1930s the Northern line was really crowded,' he'd said. 'There was a plan to build an express route from Clapham South to Belsize Park. Well, the war put a stop to that idea, but when thousands of people started sheltering in the Tube stations during the bombing, the deep level shelters were needed. The idea was that when the war was over, most of them would be made into the express route.'

Jo was working really hard to clear a way through. She was hot now, and even more thirsty. Although she needed to go on she felt very nervous. She remembered that the next part of the journey, although her Dad was there to reassure her, had been nerve-wracking. The steep descent even further underground made her feel claustrophobic – the sweet,

fresh air and warming sunlight on the surface seemed like another world.

As soon as there was space for her to squeeze through, she did. She caught her breath and set off down a short corridor, past more disused lift shafts, and another spiral staircase, plunging steeply and sickeningly down into the darkness. She remembered that the tunnel below was divided horizontally into two levels. She made a vow to stay on the top one, and get out as soon as she possibly could. She wondered if she would run into Crazy Em.

'The shelters were meant to hold twelve thousand people each,' her father had said, 'but in the end they had eight thousand bunks. There were toilets, ventilation and medical centres. They took about eighteen months to build, and the government didn't really want to open them to the public.'

'Why ever not?' asked Jo, astonished. She tried to imagine eight thousand people living so far below the surface. 'I would have hated it,' she said with feeling, 'But it makes perfect sense. Why did they object?'

'Apart from anything else, the shelters cost a fortune to run and they wanted them for other reasons – military bases and army barracks. Even before that the public wanted to shelter in the ordinary Tube stations and it wasn't allowed. It was thought it would be dangerous for children. There was the risk of disease spreading. Maybe everyone would get demoralised and just stay put. So the stations were locked. But the public shelters were full to bursting and people were afraid.'

'So they opened them up?

Paul shook his head. 'Not to start with. But the day after the Blitz began a huge crowd of East Enders gathered outside Liverpool Street Station. And they wouldn't go away until the gates were opened and they were allowed to go in'

'Good on the East Enders,' said Jo, feeling angry. 'What were they meant to do? Just wait to get bombed?'

Memories of the past faded abruptly as Jo missed her footing and slipped on the steps. The ever-twisting stairs made her feel giddy and disoriented. She concentrated on counting the steps to keep her fear at bay. Strangely comforting, counting.

By the time she reached the ground her legs were shaking. She shone her torch to get her bearings. Nearby were lift shafts, a room with a door saying 'DANGER – KEEP OUT'. Jo remembered the glee with which her dad had opened the forbidden door. He was more excited than her by its contents – everything needed to keep the lifts and ventilation working. She gave it a miss this time, and set off down the main tunnel. She came to a crumbling toilet block. Logically Jo knew there was no more point using the defunct toilet than anywhere else but something fastidious in her was satisfied and she felt a lot more comfortable afterwards.

Nearby was a huge ventilation fan – when it had been running it sucked used air out of the tunnel and fresh air was drawn down the spiral staircase. Now it was motionless and there was an eerie stillness.

She knew the tunnel was about a quarter of a mile long, with staircases at each end and one in the middle connecting the two levels. 'Not long now,' she muttered to herself. She was tempted to run, but a deep instinct made her move quietly and stealthily.

She passed the entrance to a staircase that led upwards to the mainline station – it had been blocked off for a long time now and was completely impassable. She could see there had been a phone near there – she remembered that the shelters had their own telephone system and local exchange.

Although she longed to be out of the tunnel, Jo had no idea what she would do when she was back at the surface. Clearly her mum had been trying to send her some directions and Jo thought about it as she walked.

She was almost at the central staircase to the lower level when she heard voices. Jo's blood ran cold. She forced herself to move forward stealthily, making hardly a sound.

She was right by the stairway when a burst of laughter rang out. Startled, her hands clammy and clumsy with fear, she dropped the torch. Helplessly she heard it roll away and bump, step by step, down the stairway to the lower level. As the torch fell, the On switch was knocked and Jo watched in horror, mesmerised, as arcs of light bounced and flickered off the walls and ceiling, cart-wheeling and spiralling in slow motion.

The laughter and talking stopped abruptly. Someone yelled, 'Incomer!' There was the sound of running feet and a blood-curdling yell.

Jo took to her heels and ran hell for leather towards the end of the tunnel, but she was trapped. Lights appeared at the top of each staircase, and began to move towards her. Fear turned her knees to jelly, and she just sank to the floor. She felt light-headed, sick and weak with hunger. Everything in her head whirled white, then dark, her ears rang. She looked up too late to avoid the fist that came crashing down. Darkness engulfed her.

"And now she's afraid," thought Matthew. 'Of her sister, of course.' And he sighed. It is no pleasure to be right about something if that something is dark and dangerous. Both words applied to Lethe.

When she was plain Lethe Lake, she, like her twin, was one of Matthew's best students. Quick to learn, dazzling, clever and incisive. Even then Matthew could see her potential for greatness – and, all too quickly, her potential for ruthlessness.

'You are destined to be mistresses of memory,' he had told them when they were first sent to him. 'Your names are Lethe and Alithea, but do you know their meanings?' He spoke to Ali, younger than her twin by just a few minutes. He noted that she considered his words solemnly, weighing them carefully. 'Alithea, you are named after the Greek goddess of Truth. What is real and true will be revealed to you. Your gift will be to enable remembrance in those who have forgotten their

truth. Do not be surprised if your power brings pain. Freedom from falsity comes at a cost.'

He turned to the other young woman, and saw hunger and ambition burning in her eyes. 'Lethe, you are named for the river of forgetfulness and you can help those in distress and shock to find rest in oblivion. You can only give what is requested of you, and that must be done sparingly.'

Matthew remembered the words he had spoken so solemnly. Nowadays it was hard to remember if he had taken his morning pills, but the events of the distant past shone clearly in his memory.

The cat stretched and yawned, recalling the old man to the present day. 'The thing is, Sergeant, Lethe found ways of making people ask for what she wanted them to have.'

Back then he had addressed them both bluntly. 'Your powers are rare and will grow strong if nourished carefully. With wisdom, each of you will be a great healer. Without it, you'll just be another drug pusher. Wisdom is the difference between the healer and the dealer. If you create dependency, you may well become powerful. You may well become famous, rich, and influential. But you will have failed.'

It was the kick in her stomach that brought Jo round. She groaned and curled up as her rucksack was pulled off her shoulders. She opened her eyes. All she could see were heavy, black boots – automatically she counted them. Twelve. She tried to stand up, but rough hands pushed her back down. She looked up and saw a circle of lights above her.

As her eyes adjusted, she could see six shadowy figures. They wore lights like miners' lamps over dark balaclava helmets. One of the shadows spoke.

'It's just a kid.' The speaker was male.

'A kid who shouldn't be here.' This voice was female and hostile.

'Could be a Vermin spy, I suppose.' The first speaker had an air of natural authority. 'What's in her bag?'

'Crappy old Walkman. No good to anyone. Decent pair of jeans. I'm having them.' The hostile voice again.

Another voice chimed in. A boy with an Irish accent. 'What's that round her neck? Might be worth a bit.' A hand reached to grab Jo's locket.

She snaked out of reach and stood up, scared to death but defiant. She clenched her fists.

'You can have my money,' she said. 'But you don't get the locket.'

'Oh? I think I'll have just exactly what I want and there's nothing you can do about it, little girl.' Jo had never heard such spite before. The malice seethed in the masked girl's voice like maggots on rotting meat.

A different voice spoke – a younger boy, with a painful wheeze. 'Just let her go, Lucy. She doesn't know who we are.'

'But she knows where we are. And now she knows my name, you stupid little tosser.'

There was a cry of pain from the boy with the wheeze.

The first speaker spoke slowly. 'We have choices. We can let her go. Or we can keep her. Or....'

'Or she could have a nasty accident and that's an end of it.' Lucy's voice was cruel.

'She might be useful,' said the first speaker. He seemed to be some kind of leader. 'She's pretty enough...'

Lucy laughed sardonically. 'Pretty? I don't think so. And I don't think she could fight. Soft as shit. And I bet she's never nicked a thing. Only had to ask Mummy and Daddy for whatever she wanted.'

Jo looked towards the girl. She could hear the jealousy in Lucy's voice. But there was something else. Crazy Em had told Jo emping was problematic in the Deep Shelter and that seemed true enough. People's thoughts seemed fuzzy and unclear here. But she could truth-see stronger than ever before.

It seemed as if the danger and the fear, the darkness and the determination, had helped her power to grow, like a plant pushing its way from the depths of the earth towards the light. Jo had been feeling

vulnerable and defenceless, but now she took some comfort from the realisation that she too could attack if necessary.

Looking at Lucy was like seeing inside a computer that had been wired up by a maniac. Images from Lucy's earliest life whirled in Jo's mind's eye. Just pictures – no words. What Jo saw made her feel pity, but pity was no good now. She saw an opportunity and took it.

'She made you eat dog food.'

Lucy hissed in disbelief. No-one said a word. The air was electric.

'She whipped you with the dog's lead.'

Lucy snarled. 'Shut your mouth, you cow, or I'll kick it shut.' Her voice seemed hard as nails, but behind the hardness something was quivering.

'She's a witch!' Another voice this time – sounding like a younger girl. A frightened girl.

Now the leader spoke. 'Can you see us all, witch-girl? Can you see me?'

Jo looked. One minute there was a dark shape with a miner's lamp, then there was a crazy tangle before shadowy images swam into focus. She felt sick. 'Cigarette burns,' she whispered. 'His initials.' She heard him gasp, then regain command of himself.

'Stay there,' commanded the leader. 'You lot – come over here.' The shadowy figures withdrew and whispered urgently.

Jo looked at the huddle of kids and realised with a sinking heart that what she was able to see was damage – damage done to small children before they had words or understanding. Whatever flashes of brightness, hope, joy or love flickered in each little life was nothing compared to the darkness of pain, shame and anger that had grown, twisted and bitter, as the child grew.

'It's done to them, and they pass it on,' she thought to herself, then wondered what they were planning to do with her, what horror they might wreak. The stairs at the end of the tunnel were only a hundred metres or so away. She thought about making a run for it.

'Nothing to lose,' thought Jo, so she ran. Even as she grabbed her rucksack and the discarded Walkman the huddle broke up and the shadows moved towards her. She was nearly at the end of the tunnel, able to see the stairway going up out of the Deep Shelter, able to see more lift shafts and toilets, and a door, to another plant room, when she was brought down by a flying tackle. She twisted like an eel as she fell, so her landing was partly cushioned by whoever had tackled her. Both were winded, gasping as the others ran up and surrounded them.

The gang of crazy children swarmed over Jo, pulling her hair, biting and scratching her, spiteful and sharp, full of glee and malice. Then they were swatted away like flies, and Jo was dragged to her feet. The one she thought of as the leader spoke to her. 'We could kill you,' he said. 'Chuck your body in the sump and no-one will ever find you. That's Lucy's favourite idea, naturally. But some of us think your little gift could be very useful. So here's the deal. Join us, or go down with the mosquitoes, alligators and whatever else is lurking there.' Then he whispered. 'And if you can see that I don't want to kill you, you are quite right. But Lucy will.'

'I'll never join you,' gasped Jo.

'Very well then. Your choice.'

He grabbed her arm roughly and immediately she was surrounded. In total panic now Jo fought back as hard as she could but, out-numbered as she was, she was easily overcome.

And then a disembodied voice rang out in the darkness.

'This ends now.'

Chapter Five – Crazy Em

Everyone froze as the door to the plant room slowly began to open. Ghostly purple light spilled out, surrounding a terrifying tall and skeletal figure with a wild halo of mauve and silver-tinged tangled hair. The figure raised her arm and pointed at Jo.

'You. Emp-girl. Come with me. And you Ferals get on back to your own level.'

Before Jo had time to think or even speak, a skeletal hand snaked out and gripped her wrist, pulling her into the room. The door slammed shut.

The unearthly light came from a metal cupboard containing what seemed to be a huge light bulb, glowing purple with sparks dancing. It seemed to be standing on a large number of glass legs. Her dad's voice came back to Jo.

'Mercury Arc Rectifiers convert mains power to direct power to work the lift machinery. Apparently they are quite beautiful. I'd love to see one working, but I don't suppose I ever will.'

A voice Jo had heard before interrupted her thoughts. An old, brittle, angry voice.

'Don't gawp at the octopus, you stupid girl. Ultraviolet light is bad for you. They've gone for now. Come on.'

Crazy Em grabbed her wrist again, yanking her towards the door, then stopped in her tracks. She was staring at Jo's arm. Jo noticed, and automatically pulled her sleeve down. Crazy Em raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. She shoved Jo outside, then padlocked the plant room door securely. She pushed Jo roughly up the stairs.

Rescuer or not, Jo was sick of being pushed about. She felt mutinous.

'If you'd get a move on, I wouldn't need to push you,' observed the old woman. Jo had been emped. She put up her shield and Crazy Em laughed. The etiquette of emping clearly eluded Crazy Em.

This stairway was like its opposite number – steep and seemingly never-ending. Although Jo was tired,

aching and shaky she felt such relief at moving up, away from the claustrophobic gloom of the deep level, that she soon didn't need pushing.

The top of the stairs, more lift shafts, a short tunnel, another metal door and then on to the platform. Crazy Em pushed open a door.

'In here,' she commanded.

Jo looked around her. The room boasted an odd assortment of furniture, most of which had been salvaged from skips. There were heaps of cushions of all colours and fabrics – rich, faded velvets, burgundy, bronze and dusky pink; cheerful crocheted squares in rainbow colours; raggedy silks gleaming like jewels and painstakingly embroidered covers frayed at the edges in testament to their great age. An upturned box served as a table, covered in a patchwork cloth made from hexagons of silk the size of a penny and sewn together with exquisite, tiny stitches. Curtains of every imaginable style were draped over most of the original shelves; floral chintz; floaty organza; rich, heavy brocade; cotton gingham; dusty velveteen. One set of shelves, from floor to ceiling, was loaded with books.

'Sit yourself down. You look like you could do with a nice hot drink and a digestive biscuit.' Jo thought they were the most wonderful words she had ever heard. Her legs were shaking so much from the fear and the long walk and the steep climb, she didn't so much sit down as fall down. She sank into soft, squashy cushions and closed her eyes gratefully. Crazy Em sat opposite her in an old green and gold Lloyd Loom chair. She laid a woolly cover over Jo.

Jo had never felt so tired. As the danger receded and her chilled body began to warm through she started to drift away. Then, with a moan, she sat bolt upright and opened her eyes wide.

'I must stay awake,' she said urgently. 'Please don't let me fall asleep.'

'You're safe enough now,' said the old woman, as she lit a camping stove and boiled some milk. 'Those Ferals won't dare come after you here.'

Jo thought of Sebastian and shivered. She still didn't know if he had broken his neck or survived the fall on the embankment. 'You don't understand,' she said.

There was a pause, then, 'Oh, I think I do,' said Crazy Em, and Jo realised she was being emped very thoroughly and very skilfully. She didn't even try to shield. 'Hmm. We need to confuse the enemy. Let me think.'

They sat drinking hot chocolate laced with what tasted suspiciously like brandy in companionable, thought-filled silence. An observer would have thought them an odd pair – a gaunt old woman and a dishevelled, exhausted girl in a cosy nest sited in what had once been a station store-room.

'I have an idea,' said Crazy Em. 'I want you to close your eyes and picture this Sebastian creature.'

Jo pulled a face. 'Must I?'

'If you want to get some sleep, yes. I am not in the habit of making futile suggestions, young lady.'

Jo shivered. Reluctantly she conjured up Sebastian's sinister moon-face with his mean little button eyes and his twisted half-smile. She concentrated until his eyes seemed to be staring directly into hers.

'Got him,' said Crazy Em, with malicious satisfaction. 'Not dead then. More's the pity.' The face Jo saw contorted in agony. Sebastian's bony hands held his head as he rocked to and fro with pain. Crazy Em laughed heartlessly. 'That'll keep him busy for a while. A bad migraine can last a very long time. Now you can sleep. I'll keep watch over you... and him.'

Jo was impressed and horrified simultaneously. 'But how...' she began.

'Don't ask. Just sleep.'

Jo slept.



Matthew looked at the pretty but weary woman in front of him. Next to her a handsome, well-built man sat smiling and singing quietly to himself. Every now and then he rocked back and forwards and reached out to the woman and stroked her face.

'Did he ask her?' said Matthew.

The reply was hesitant. 'He said he wished he didn't remember something....'

'And she took that as a request. What was he talking about?'

Ali looked awkward. 'Something he's never told me.'

Matthew looked at her steadily and shrewdly. 'But something you know. Did you read him?'

'No. I never read him. I read her. It was a long time ago. Paul is a good man.'

'Right now he is a child. A happy, innocent child. It must have been something very big to throw him back so far.'

Ali sighed. 'Yes. Living with it has been so painful for him.'

'And you. Why didn't you tell him you knew?'

'I didn't think he would be able to bear it. He would be ashamed and then resent me for reminding him of his shame. I thought he would leave rather than face me knowing his secret.'

'You do not want him to stay a happy child. But neither do you want him to be an unhappy man. You want me to repair his memory, and throw away the bad thing.'

Tears threatened. Ali looked at her beloved teacher and her hope faded. 'You won't do it.'

'Althea, I can't do it. No-one can. Burying it is one thing. Forgetting it is another. Both help for a little while. But I cannot make it vanish. Only love and acceptance will help. For after all, as Longfellow said, the best thing one can do when it's raining is to let it rain.'

Ali wept helplessly. Paul seemed lost to her, and she had never been out of contact with her clever, sensible, sparky girl for so long. Ali did not consider herself a particularly religious woman, but she was praying even so.

Matthew folded her in his arms as her tears fell.

'I want him back,' she said, drying her tears. 'We need him. Then together we can protect Jo.'

'Then we must set to work,' said Matthew. 'He is a long way away.'



Jo opened her eyes. She seemed to be in the middle of a jumble sale. Then she remembered where she was. A pair of sharp, dove-grey eyes were trained on her. Jo smiled and stretched. 'Thank you,' she said. 'I needed that.'

'You're welcome. You look a lot better now you've slept a bit. I've been thinking. We need to make sure you can rest a while every day. How about if I see to it that Sebastian wakes up to a sunrise migraine? That way you can sleep for a few hours – between dawn and eight o'clock, say.'

'That would be wonderful.' Jo grinned with relief. 'Thank goodness you were in the plant room back then, just when I needed help. What an amazing coincidence.'

Crazy Em laughed. 'Coincidence my eye! Reg was here – he'd been searching for you everywhere. He ran into a spot of bother, and when he came back for you – you'd vanished. We were afraid you'd meet up with the Ferals so I waited in the plant room. Could have been very nasty.'

Jo shuddered as she remembered. 'Their leader thought I might be useful.'

'Zebo? You need to watch him. He comes across as almost charming, almost normal, but he's happy to let Lucy do his dirty work for him when it suits him.'

'Who are they?'

'Wild kids on the run. You saw the damage on the inside, but they're mostly all damaged on the outside, too.'

'Aren't you frightened of them?'

'Not now, but when they're older it might come to that,' said Crazy Em thoughtfully. 'Right now they're more scared of me. Plus I help them out with food and medicine. But each of those children is a time-bomb, ticking away and growing more twisted every day. Not the kind of people Vermin want in their brave new world. Well, not in plain view, anyway. Under cover, that's a different matter.'

'Vermin?'

'You call them the VMN; VergissMeinNicht, which means Forget-me-not. A beautiful name for an ugly organisation. We call 'em Vermin.'

'What do they do exactly?'

'They use the word re-habilitate. I say they get rid of the people who are imperfect, inferior or independent.'

'Like Hitler did.'

'Yes, like Hitler. They hero-worship him.' She looked round. 'When I was a girl, just a bit older than you, my sweetheart was off fighting Hitler and I was sheltering down here with my parents. I have always felt safe here. After the Riots I needed to find somewhere to live. This was perfect.'

'Did the Rioters, I mean Righteous, destroy your home?'

Crazy Em looked at Jo with new respect. 'You know of The Righteous?'

'Not much – only the name really.'

'That's more than most people can say. People have short memories when it suits them. The Righteous never did me any harm, bless them. No, it was the Vermin. They were rounding up anyone they thought was too old to be of any use. They demolished our homes. Said they weren't fit to live in. Mine was a pretty little cottage with hollyhocks and honeysuckle. They wanted the land, of course. It's always about land. They said they'd re-home us in retirement complexes with every facility. More like Death Camps, damn their eyes.'

'How did you escape?' asked Jo, horrified and angry.

'The Righteous; Reg and his friends. I have no-one left and they've been like family to me. They helped me get this place sorted out. God knows where my friends and neighbours went. But at least I can sit here and remember my Midge.'

The old woman's eyes glistened and a shaky smile lit up her proud, hawk-like face. Jo saw beauty visit Crazy Em. There was a silence.

When Jo spoke again, her question was tentative. 'Um, what may I call you, please?'

'I know everyone calls me Crazy Em, but I prefer to be called just plain Em.'

'Thank you, Em.'

'My pleasure. Now, time for some breakfast. I can offer you an apple. Then what?'

'Well, my mum has been emping some sort of code – I think it's directions to a safe place – but I don't understand it. It wasn't always clear, so there are several permutations.' Jo showed her the diary.

Em looked and then smiled quizzically. '*Eskimo?*'

Jo grimaced. 'Something to do with *Quinn the Eskimo – The Mighty Quinn*.' Em looked baffled. 'It's a song by Bob Dylan.'

Em grunted and studied the notes. 'Used to be good at crossword puzzles,' she said. 'Could N and one mean *None*? And W and eight mean *Wait*?'

'That's clever,' said Jo dubiously, 'but it doesn't make any sense to me. Perhaps it will come to me later.' She squared her shoulders. 'Em, you've been so kind and I really appreciate it, but I feel I ought to get going.'

'Suit yourself,' said Em brusquely. 'I've got plenty to do without being bothered with silly girls.'

Jo knew without being told that Em's abrupt manner concealed the fact that the old woman had enjoyed her company and would be sorry to see her go. Nevertheless, she did have to keep going. She rummaged through her rucksack, mourning the loss of her best jeans. She tidied herself up as best she could, then together she and Em set off for the surface.

More tunnels, more spiral staircases. Jo felt as if she were in a labyrinth. But all the time she was getting nearer to the light and fresh air and her heart was lifting, in spite of the dangers that undoubtedly lay ahead.

At last they came to a circular room, with a heavy metal door, once clearly broken down but now repaired and securely padlocked. Em produced a large bunch of keys, and the door to the outside world was open.

Now Jo's heart was pounding. She was excited and tearful all at once. It felt like she had been in the

tunnels for days and there had been times when she thought she would never find a way out. She turned to Em and smiled tremulously. 'Thank you.'

Em smiled back. 'Thank you. It is good to feel useful. If you need me, you know where to find me. There's another pillbox like this, just down the road, with a door that's padlocked on the outside. You can have my spare key. Or you can emp, and I'll be here. Take the key and then you've got choices.'

Jo thanked her again, privately thinking that she would have to be desperate to set foot underground again. 'Never again,' she thought.

'Never name the well from which you will not drink,' chided Em. 'Life has a way of making you very thirsty. Now off you go!'

Chapter Six – The Mighty Quinn

Jo could hardly believe she was back in the outside world. She had not imagined a drizzly London afternoon. In her mind's eye, she would emerge to a city that was sparkling bright in the summer sun, yet the electric tang in the air suggested a thunderstorm was on the way. No matter; it was a hundred times better than being underground.

Her first port of call was a public convenience. She came out looking and feeling fresh and tidy. That was a great relief to her. Her money was safely back in her purse and she looked forward to buying some food. It seemed like forever since she'd had a decent meal, and when she saw a café advertising an all-day breakfast, she was delighted.

'Come on in and sit yourself down!' The smile on the open, friendly face of the waitress was the perfect antidote to the dark subterranean world Jo had just left. According to the name tag on her apron she was called Diana. She chatted cheerfully as she took Jo's order, and her kindness warmed Jo's heart.

'You enjoyed that,' smiled Diana, having seen Jo demolish a huge plate of eggs, bacon, sausages, beans, tomato and fried bread.

'Oh yes,' agreed Jo, thinking that her health-conscious mother would have had a fit. 'It was delicious!'

'Have a look at the desserts menu,' Diana suggested.

Jo didn't need asking twice. Sticky toffee pudding; lemon meringue pie; chocolate torte and more. And, at the bottom of the menu was the address of the café. Di's Diner, Haverstock Hill. And underneath: NW3 2AL.

Jo laughed out loud. Her mother had been emping her a postcode. NW1. That couldn't be too far away!

'Is everything alright?' asked Diana.

'It certainly is,' answered Jo, smiling. 'I've just realised something important. Can you tell me where NW1 is, please?'

'That's easy. Camden, where my mum lives.'

'Thank you,' said Jo. 'I'll have raspberry cheesecake, please.'

Jo finished her meal, paid the bill and walked to the door. As she opened it she noticed the air was warm and heavy. She looked up at the overcast sky. 'It's getting dark early,' she observed.

'Yes. There's a storm coming,' said Diana. 'Take care!'

Jo set off towards Camden, feeling almost light-hearted. Parts of the route were familiar to Jo, especially Chalk Farm tube station, but it was a long time since she had come to London with her mother so nowhere sprang to mind as an obvious sanctuary. She vaguely remembered a busy market by a canal. She was sure she was on the right track when she saw a huge sign saying:

CAMDEN MARKET

The sky grew darker as a few heavy raindrops began to fall. Jo looked up and smiled, enjoying the cool, refreshing sensation on her face in the oppressive heat of the pending storm.

There was so much to see in Camden Market – the Stables market where the Horse Hospital for the canal horses had been; the original craft market at Camden Lock and more recent ones like Camden Canal. The gathering storm heightened Jo's senses so that everything she looked at seemed sparkling and vivid. The scent of damp earth warned her that the storm was imminent.

In spite of the rain there were a lot of shoppers. She was struck by how young and healthy everyone looked, and then she shuddered as she remembered Em's words. 'They were rounding up anyone they thought was too old to be of any use.' The crowds quickly sought shelter as the weather suddenly worsened.

The rain was heavy now. The shoppers had all but disappeared. Raindrops splashed into puddles, soaking her jeans, which clung to her legs. Tatters of memory of her day out here with Ali were coming back to her.

Just thinking about Ali and Paul brought tears to her eyes. 'Don't give up now,' she told herself sternly.

And then a tremendous bolt of lightning split the sky. In the brilliant flash there appeared before her a familiar silhouette. As her eyes adjusted she recognised the pale young man with wild, dark hair. He was wearing a light shirt, black waistcoat and jeans. But what on earth was Bob Dylan doing here? And how come he was young again?

There was another flash of lightning. Jo grinned to herself. She'd been fooled by a life-size cardboard cut-out. She'd seen this image dozens of times; Bob Dylan holding a pile of cue cards, with the discarded sheets like fallen leaves on the ground. The lyrics to *Subterranean Homesick Blues*. Sometimes Jo felt as if she could pass an exam in Dylanology. This cue card, however, had words from a different song.

As a deafening boom of thunder shook the rooftops Jo felt a huge weight fall from her shoulders. *Come in*, said the message. Then another song title. *Shelter From the Storm*. On the nearby shop door were two words. One was OPEN. The other was QUINN'S.

Directly overhead, the storm reached a crescendo. Jo opened the door and went inside.

'Welcome to *Another Side*! You must be Angelina! I'm Quinn. And here you will find everything there is to find about The Man in the Long Black Coat aka A Man Called Alias, not to mention Elston Gunn, Blind Boy Grunt, Lucky Wilbury, Boo Wilbury, Elmer Johnson, Sergei Petrov, Jack Frost, Jack Fate, Willow Scarlet, Robert Milkwood Thomas, Robert Zimmerman and Bob Dylan!'

The speaker looked like the ring master for a particularly disreputable circus. From his crumpled silk top hat with an orange feather to his elegant Cuban heeled cowboy boots by way of a tailcoat that had seen better days and pin-striped trousers held up with string, it was clear that this was no mere Dylan fan – he was a Dylan song brought to life. Accompanying the eccentric outfit a pair of kindly brown eyes twinkled

above an impressive moustache straight out of the 1960s. 'Come through to the back and have a nice cup of tea and tell me all about it. You look exhausted.'

Quinn turned the OPEN sign to CLOSED, locked the shop door, and led Jo through a bewildering selection of all things Bob. The shop was packed with records, books and posters. The posters covered every surface. Jo had glimpses of a fresh-faced young man holding an acoustic guitar; a sharp-featured, gaunt, hollow-eyed prophet; an almost feminine rock star; a sepia cowboy; an old man dressed like a retired matador. Then she was in a pleasant room with French windows which opened out onto a miniscule yard filled with a profusion of plants and flowers. As the storm raged outside she sank into a comfortable old armchair. Quinn handed her a towel. As she dried her hair she said, puzzled, 'You were expecting me?'

Quinn was busy making tea. 'Your mum emped me. We had a code back in the day. Dylan songs, of course. She emped a line from your song – *Farewell, Angelina*, about the sky being on fire. So I knew there was danger, and I knew it was about you. Later she emped again. *Slow Train Coming*. So I've been expecting you.'

'Angelina is my middle name,' said Jo. 'But they made sure of the Dylan connection with my first name as well. Is everyone your age obsessed with him?'

Quinn laughed. 'Let me guess. Ramona? Jane? Sarah? Corrina? Lily? Rosemary?'

Jo shook her head, laughing back. It was impossible to not like Quinn.

'I remember now,' he said. 'Welcome, Johanna. We have met before, you know.'

'Call me Jo,' she asked. 'When did we meet?'

'You were about nine,' he said. 'I'd just come back from bumming around in Greece and had a record stall here – not specialising in Dylan then. Your mum had brought you to London for the day and was looking through the records when we recognised each other. Now she's one of my best customers.'

Jo had a fleeting memory of standing at a colourful stall, surrounded by busy shoppers, impatiently hopping

from foot to foot as her mother talked forever to a sun-burned, laughing man who looked like a pirate captain.

'You knew each other already?'

Now the twinkly eyes looked sad. 'Back before you were born,' he replied and turned away, busying himself with milk and sugar. 'We were all at college together – your mother, your aunt and I.' His voice changed. 'And Paul.' Jo resisted the temptation to read him. *Invitation only*, she remembered Ali saying. Suddenly there was a thunderclap and all the lights went out. To her surprise Jo had a vision of four smiling young people, looking like something from the cover of *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Ali, Lethe, Paul and Quinn. Then, without wanting to and without trying, she saw something of Quinn's truth and damage.

This power was new to Jo. She knew she was not in control of it. Emps were just words and thoughts. But now she had images of people that were like X-rays of their souls. The power had become much stronger underground, but it was still with her even now. She saw a shadow in Quinn's heart – a shadow made of betrayals, broken promises and lost hope. She wanted to reach out to him, but then there was something more and she was so shocked she could not speak.

As the lights flickered back on, she saw his eyes were bright again and his smiling, kindly expression was back in place, banishing the shadows. However his shield was now well and truly up against her.

'I'm just going to emp Ali,' he said. 'I guess we are all worried about the emps being traced?' Jo nodded, still struggling with the secret she had seen. 'Right. I'll just say *Don't Think Twice, It's All Right*. He concentrated.

There was a pause. Jo recovered herself and asked, hoping, 'Any response?'

He shook his head, sadly. 'Let's hope it got through to her, even if she's staying dark.' He looked concerned. 'So. What has been happening, Jo?'

By the time the whole story had been told darkness had fallen and the storm had passed. A fragrant vegetable biryani had been delivered from a nearby takeaway and Jo was relaxing in the company of this funny, wise, intelligent and handsome man. It was so easy to tune into his humour and play silly word games with him.

'What time is bed-time?' he asked, seeing her yawn.

She pulled a face. 'Not until dawn,' she said. 'Then Em will keep her mind's eye on Sebastian so I can sleep in safety.'

'Just as well I'm a night owl, then.' He looked at her thoughtfully. 'We need to stop you from nodding off, though. How about a game of cards? Something to keep you alert.'

Jo agreed. 'I know!' she said. 'We could play the Rainbow Game!'

'And what's that when it's at home?'

'I invented it,' said Jo proudly. 'The day Aunt Lethe came. I was cycling home after school, and there was a wonderful rainbow. So I made up this game. Think of a category. Like Food, for example.'

Quinn smiled. 'OK. How about Food?'

'Then I have to think of something to eat for every colour of the rainbow.' She thought for a while. 'Tomato. Orange, obviously. Lemon. Cabbage. Blueberry.' She ground to a halt. 'Indigo's tricky,' she said.

'Lots of people say it's just a shade of blue,' said Quinn. 'Not a separate colour at all. But Sir Isaac Newton thought light and sound were linked so he wanted seven colours in the spectrum to go with the seven notes in the scale.'

'Thanks, Isaac,' grumbled Jo. 'What colour are whortleberries? Very dark blue?'

'Close enough,' conceded Quinn.

'And plums for purple,' said Jo triumphantly. 'And your category is.... Birds.'

'Aha! My specialist subject! Let's see now. Scarlet Ibis. Golden Oriole. Green Woodpecker. Blue Jay. Indigo Bunting. Purple Martin.'

'You forgot orange,' pointed out Jo.

'So I did. OK. The Orange Weaver. Found in Africa. Splendidly stropky, too, when it comes to defending its nests and young. Your turn. And I challenge you to find seven colourful phrases.'

'Like she saw red?' queried Jo. Quinn nodded. Jo pulled a face. 'I'll come back to orange. Yellow streak for cowardice. Green with envy. Feeling blue and out of the blue. Turn the air navy blue.'

'Bit of a stretch,' observed Quinn, smiling.

Jo ignored him. 'And my English teacher's pet hate – purple prose. Can't think of a single phrase with orange in, though.'

'Me neither. Unless you allow *Home, home on the o-range*. If you won't, I'll have to make alternative orange-ments.' Quinn grinned at the sheer awfulness of his puns.

Jo groaned. 'I'm afraid not. In fact, I think you ought to have some points deducted. Anyway, time's up.'

'Fair enough. So you've scored an unlucky thirteen and I've got full marks.'

'So far. And your next category is... song titles.'

Quinn laughed. 'My other specialist subject! Easy. Red, Red Wine. Mellow Yellow. Green, Green Grass of Home. Singing the Blues. Mood Indigo. Purple Haze. Ha! And Quinn takes the lead!'

Jo put her head on one side and raised an eyebrow. 'Not so fast, my friend. You forgot orange. Again.'

'Hmm. Can I have Tangerine Dream? They were a Sixties band.' Jo shook her head. 'OK – I'll have *Cinnamon Girl* by Neil Young. That's sort of orange. Seven out of seven, I think.'

'I bought my mum a Cinnamon Star poinsettia last Christmas,' said Jo. Her voice was a bit shaky. 'It's really unusual. A lovely soft apricot colour. Can I have Flowers and Plants for my category?'

'Of course.' Quinn had noticed the shakiness. He tried to distract Jo. 'I'm claiming a bonus point – I've just thought of a phrase with orange in. My great-granddad used to say Queer as a clockwork

orange. So I'm well in the lead. You'll never catch up now!'

Jo rose to the challenge. 'Peonies. My mum's poinsettia. Daisies.'

'Daisies are white,' objected Quinn.

'Their centres are yellow,' countered Jo. 'Think of ox-eye daisies. And anyway, there are daisies with yellow petals. So no penalty point for you, my friend.' She stopped and thought. 'Poison ivy. Forget-me-nots.' Her voice trailed off.

'What's up, Jo?' asked Quinn.

'Well, they are such pretty little flowers. And the German word is lovely, as well. VergissMeinNicht. But it's been spoiled.'

'You mean the VMN have spoiled it, don't you.'

Jo nodded. 'They're the Vermin, according to Crazy Em.' Quinn laughed but he noticed that Jo's eyes were troubled. 'She said it was a beautiful name for an ugly organisation.'

'Perhaps she's not so crazy, then. What they do is ugly. They want to create a perfect world, whatever the cost. So if you're old, or sick, or disabled, sooner or later your home gets seized, you're rounded up and sent to a correction facility. Not that they're called that.'

'Em said they were called retirement complexes. But she called them death camps.'

'I like the sound of Em. She's right. Somehow people don't last very long in those places. And they've got your property and land to pay for your care costs. So they don't have to waste money on non-productive people.'

'But what about the Righteous – they're against the Vermin, aren't they?'

Quinn sighed. 'There's so few of them, Jo. And they don't have a leader any more. Last year they tried to stop the VMN closing down a hospital. It was a peaceful protest, but they were fired on by the VMN and their leader was killed. Dozens of them were rounded up and taken to court for 'causing a riot.' They carried on protesting, but each time the authorities

used violence, then blamed the protesters. Their numbers dwindled. It took the heart out of them.'

'So why don't more people join them? Why don't you join them?'

Quinn looked embarrassed. 'It's too dangerous,' he said at last. 'And the VMN aren't stupid. They make sure that the majority of the population have just enough to keep them complacent, and are frightened enough to keep their heads down. People make the mistake of thinking tyrants are idiots, but they usually have very clever advisers.'

'Em said the Vermin hero-worship Hitler. I can't believe Aunt Lethe would hero-worship anyone, least of all that monster.'

'She was always ambitious and ruthless,' said Quinn. 'When she fell in with Titus bloody Stigmurus she met her match. They're a fatal combination.'

Jo frowned. 'Titus Stigmurus?'

'He's the head of the Vermin. King Rat. Not a clue what his real name is, or where he came from. You don't get very far trying to track his origins. Anyway, he wanted to be called something dramatic. So he borrowed the name of a venomous scorpion. Just about right for a poisonous monster who distorts and destroys everything he touches. They say that power corrupts; well, Titus Stigmurus is the epitome of that saying.'

Jo shuddered. 'Was he at college with you?'

'No, but he used to lurk about the place, peddling his evil philosophy and quietly gathering followers. To begin with Lethe found him beneath contempt, but he saw how gifted she was, and her hunger for power and he drew her in. She was more than willing.'

Jo was silent for a while. 'We didn't finish the game,' she said half-heartedly. 'We got side-tracked. An indigo flower. I know – morning glory – that can be dark blue, and to finish with – violets. No – that's too obvious. I'll have heartsease. Practically a draw.' Quinn smiled, but Jo was distracted. 'So why did the Vermin choose the forget-me-not?'

'Another distortion,' answered Quinn. 'Lots of groups use it for their emblem. There is a Forget Me

Not charity for people whose babies die. In Canada the Alzheimer Society uses it. In Newfoundland it's worn to remember the people who died in World War One. Freemasons wear it to commemorate masons who suffered because of the Nazis.'

'But it's not logical for the VMN to use it. All those groups want to remember. Aunt Lethe's power is to make people forget.'

'Yes, but that doesn't include forgetting her. Lethe and Titus have every intention of being remembered. We mustn't underestimate them.' He spoke gently. 'Lethe won't rest until she gets what she wants, Jo. We ought to change your appearance. They'll be searching for you.'

Quinn hesitated. For a moment his eyes were haunted. He stood up and shook his head, as if to clear it. 'You are so much like your mum and aunt, you know. That colour hair, with those colour eyes – it's a bit of a giveaway. Especially with Lethe being so well known.'

'Have you met Aunt Lethe since...' Jo trailed off.

'Since college? No. Though I've seen her often enough. You can't read a paper or turn on the TV without seeing something about her. But it will be a cold day in hell before we come face to face again.' His words were harsh and final. That was clearly the end of that. He changed the subject abruptly. 'So what's your new look going to be?'

'Short black hair?' she suggested. He nodded approvingly. 'Can't do much about my eyes...'

'Sunglasses,' he said. 'Mirror sunglasses. Pirate queen meets Goth-girl meets Punk princess. Pale face and dark lipstick.'

Jo laughed, imagining Ali's face at the thought of her sensible daughter transformed into a rock 'n roll rebel.

'Won't be long,' said Quinn, putting on his coat. It was an old military great-coat and he looked like a highwayman. 'There's an all-night chemist round the corner. Don't open the door to anyone, and don't fall asleep. I'll be five minutes.'

The room seemed empty without him. Jo drew the curtains, blotting out the moon which reminded her of Sebastian. She had started to feel safe, but thoughts of Lethe's dream-tracing minion unsettled her. 'Don't think about him,' she told herself fiercely. The seconds ticked by slowly. Jo looked longingly at the phone. Oh, to be able to ring home! Or speak to Samantha. Just to hear a voice from before the madness began.

The temptation was so strong, and the loneliness so deep. Surely a few words with Sam wouldn't do any harm? She picked up the phone, and started to dial Samantha's number. She was halfway through when she shook her head and sighed deeply. She replaced the phone slowly. What could she possibly say? 'Hi, Sam, I'm on the run from my power-crazed aunt and her sadistic side-kick'? Also she knew, deep in her heart of hearts, that even if Quinn was off the radar as far as Lethe was concerned now, even if they hadn't got round to Samantha yet, it was only a matter of time before these connections and more were made. Everyone she knew was in danger. How many ways were there for the story to end?

'There will be a battle,' said Jo grimly. 'And I will have to win.'

'So we must make you strong.' Jo had not heard Quinn come back. His voice was sombre, but then he laughed his infectious laugh, and emptied his carrier bag onto the table. Hair dye, make up, sunglasses, accessories spilled out. He flourished a large pair of scissors. 'Let the makeover begin!'

'Have you, um, ever cut hair before?' asked Jo carefully as her curls fell to the ground in alarming amounts. Quinn was brandishing the flashing blades with manic glee.

He laughed confidently. 'Oh, ye of little faith,' he admonished. Jo noticed that was not an answer to her question. He stood back to admire his handiwork. There was a thoughtful pause. 'Best to look when this bottle of Black Pearl has done its magic,' he said hurriedly, draping a yellow tie-dye scarf over the mirror.

Jo realised that there was no logic in spending your life resenting your red curly hair only to discover too late that it wasn't so bad after all. 'It will grow again,' she said, reassuring both of them. 'When this is all over.'

It was getting on for dawn when Quinn uncovered the mirror with a flourish. There had been much back-combing and spraying. Jo felt as if her head was encased in candy floss.

'Ta-da!' he cried, standing behind her. 'Behold! Dracula's daughter!'

The mirror reflected two faces – one anxious, the other appalled. The appalled one finally spoke. 'It's terrible,' she said with feeling.

'I'm not going to argue,' said a rather subdued Quinn. 'I'm not a man to ignore the evidence.' He brightened up. 'Try the sunglasses.' She did. 'He looked forlorn. 'OK. Forget the sunglasses.' She did. 'Hmm. Right now, you need to sleep and tomorrow we'll find the outfit and the make-up to tie it all together. We will make it work, I promise.'

Even the worst hairstyle known to man couldn't take away Jo's pleasure at slipping between clean sheets on a soft, warm bed. She quickly emped Em. Sleep. The reply came back promptly. Tight. Jo did just that.



Matthew and Ali watched Paul as he lay sleeping. Free of memories and regrets, his face was peaceful and serene.

'I wonder if he would rather stay where he is,' mused Ali.

'Would you?' asked Matthew.

'I would love to lose the pain,' she answered slowly. 'But if that means I would have to lose everything else, well, no. How can we know joy if there is no sadness to compare it with?'

Matthew had a galaxy of quotes tucked away in his memory. Sometimes other people had a way of putting things that couldn't be bettered. '*... there must be darkness to see the stars. The dance is always danced above the hollow place...*'

Ali continued the quote. '*...above the terrible abyss.*' Ursula Le Guin. Jo and I have been reading the Earthsea stories together. She's still young enough to enjoy a story at bedtime.' Her voice broke. 'My girl. My dearest girl. And now she is out there, and I dare not try to reach her or else, because of me, Lethe will find her and take her.'

Her final words hung in the air. 'Lethe will find her and take her.'

'Your sister makes a habit of stealing from you,' observed Matthew.

Ali gave him a sharp look. How much did he know?

'She was always jealous.' Ali spoke carefully. 'She did not want to be one of two. She would have preferred it if I had never been born. Our mother used to tell the story that Lethe tried to push me out of the pushchair. Everyone thought it was just a childish game, but Lethe really, truly wanted the nest to herself. Like a cuckoo. She couldn't get rid of me, and that made her angry and jealous. Now she wants Jo.'

'Would that be so bad?' Matthew spoke mildly.

Ali drew a deep breath. 'Only if it doesn't matter that at the moment Jo is a great kid all set to be a very special grown up. Lethe would break her spirit then mould her into a replica of herself.'

'Successful, beautiful, ambitious and wealthy?' suggested Matthew, playing Devil's advocate.

Ali shook her head in disbelief. 'Cruel, vindictive, shallow and vain.'

'Yet you would have let her take Jo to Paris?' It was just a question, not an accusation.

There was a very long silence before Ali spoke again. Her tone was defensive. 'She wrote so eloquently. Her phone calls were persuasive. I wanted to believe she had changed.' She thought for a moment. 'Lethe has great charm, you know. She can be delightful company – witty and fun. I wanted my sister back and I thought it would be lovely for Jo to have a taste of the high life.'

'She might have grown away from you,' observed Matthew.

'Before tonight, I would have laughed and told you what a sensible girl Jo is. And that is true. And I would have said that Lethe would not harm her in any way. But now,' she said, gesturing towards Paul, 'I've seen how ruthless Lethe is and I don't want her anywhere near my girl.'

'Jo is strong and healthy, Alithea, and her powers are already formidable.'

Ali nodded. 'And at least I know she made it to Quinn's place,' she said.

'Ah,' said Matthew reflectively. 'The Mighty Quinn.'
For some reason Ali blushed.

Chapter Seven – College Memories

Whether she dreamed or not Jo couldn't remember come the next morning. She knew she went out like a light, and that the alarm rang when all she wanted to do was sleep some more. Em had been brutally realistic. 'I'll only promise what I know I can do. Four hours is fine. But you don't want me nodding off when you're still asleep. Otherwise that waste of space will start feeling better, and get to you. And we don't want that, do we?'

Indeed we don't, Jo had thought. But she was afraid that before long their small, very vulnerable defences would come crashing down. **Rise**, she emped, and back came Em's reply. **And shine**.

Rise and shine didn't quite capture it. Reluctantly Jo got out of the cosy bed. She dragged her mutinous body to the bathroom and without thinking she looked at herself in the mirror. A spiky haired Goth stared defiantly back at her. Dark circles round her tired eyes made her look like a lemur, she thought, but caught off-guard as she had been she was less horrified than she expected. 'I don't think my own mother would recognise me,' she thought. And as for Samantha....! Jo giggled at the thought. 'Goodbye, Miss Sensible-and-interesting,' she said. 'Hello, Wild Girl.'

Engulfed in Quinn's enormous dressing gown Jo drifted downstairs. A pot of tea, hot buttered toast, cereal and fresh mango was laid out for her, with a note. GONE SHOPPING, it said. BACK SOON.

Jo lingered over the delicious breakfast, then enjoyed a luxurious bath. She heard Quinn come back. He called out to her. 'New outfit on the bed. Come down and give me a twirl when you're ready.'

Choosing colours to suit Jo had clearly not troubled Quinn. She surveyed black velvet tights, shiny black boots, a microscopic black denim skirt, a black cotton top slashed and frayed to kingdom come and a black suede jacket. There were silver bracelets, a black choker with a silver filigree spider's web and silver

dagger earrings. A blood red patent leather belt completed the outfit.

Jo called out to Quinn. 'I can't wear that top, I'm afraid. It's all torn.'

'It's meant to be,' he called back but she stood her ground.

'No way am I wearing that,' she said.

'It's perfect for the character,' he grumbled.

'I don't care,' she said, her voice petulant yet determined.

'It's that or nothing,' he replied airily.

Jo was desperate. She shouted at him. 'Quinn! You've got to find me something else! I can't wear it! I just can't! And I won't. OK?' She was almost in tears.

'Alright! Keep your wig on,' he said, clearly bewildered at this storm of protest. After a short time his hand snaked round the door holding a black silk shirt.

'It's my best one,' he grumbled, 'so don't let anything happen to it!'

'Thanks, Quinn,' she said, calmer now. 'I'm sorry, but it really matters to me.'

She was dressed in no time, but the makeup took much longer. Apart from a few sneaky efforts seated at Ali's dressing table she had no experience whatsoever of cosmetics. She applied herself with grim determination to this new challenge.

She looked in the mirror again. The lemur seemed to have mutated into a panda.

There was a knock on the door. 'Can I come in? I'm longing to see the complete transformation!'

'If you must.' Jo's voice was ungracious in the extreme.

He came in. Jo stood there, daring him to laugh, or even smile. To his eternal credit he did neither.

'Not bad,' he said gallantly. 'Some black nail polish, a few adjustments to the make-up, a lot of attitude and Bob's your uncle.'

'Certainly feels that way sometimes,' grumbled Jo. 'Good old Uncle Bob.'

Quinn laughed. 'That's my girl,' he said. 'Now. About the make-up. Have another go.'

All that day, in between customers, Quinn gave her lessons in attitude. How to walk tall; how to enter a space confidently; how to intimidate the faint-hearted and how to acknowledge an equal. He was a relentless task-master.

'You're not a debutante,' he said. 'You have to walk the walk and talk the talk. People need to think twice before they mess with you. But more than anything, if Lethe and Sebastian come round here, they should be able to walk right past you without recognising you.'

The next day, with Jo having again slept soundly under Em's watchful care, Quinn shut the shop at lunchtime and they ventured out for the afternoon. The weather was sunny and the markets were crowded. Jo held her head high. She was aware of people staring at her. She remembered what Quinn had said, and stared right back. Most people dropped their eyes at once. A very small number held her gaze, and to them she gave a wave and a grin which lit up the place. Most grinned back.

There was something so liberating about being in disguise that to her surprise, Jo found she was enjoying herself immensely. She was so absorbed with her new experiences that she had no time for eeping or reading people and that too was a relief, she discovered. Then without warning she was overwhelmed with a sense of deep distress.

She looked round and saw a skinny, tough-looking blond boy taking an apple from a fruit stall. A kaleidoscope of brutal images flooded Jo's mind's eye and she gasped involuntarily, as if she had been winded.

The boy could not possibly have heard Jo's gasp, but he must have sensed something because he turned and stared directly at Jo. They locked gazes and in the end it was Jo who looked away, her head spinning with pictures she wished she could blot from her memory. When she looked again, the boy was nowhere to be seen.

'Did you see that blond boy?' Jo asked Quinn. He shook his head and Jo let it drop.

'Time for tea,' said Quinn. 'Though you need to drink something with a bit more street credibility...' He led the way to a café table by the side of the canal, and went off to order the drinks. Jo sat watching the barges coming and going, feeling warm and relaxed in the afternoon sunshine.

Then a cloud blotted out the sun and she shivered. The cheerful bustle and noise of the market faded and the crowds of people were little more than shadows. Jo watched as a sleek, gleaming forget-me-not blue barge moved slowly and noiselessly past her. Sebastian was on deck and Aunt Lethe could be clearly seen sitting in a cabin that was gilded and lined with mirrors and cut glass. She looked beautiful beyond words.

Jo was aware that Quinn had joined her. His eyes were also fixed on the barge and his expression was unreadable. Slowly the barge moved out of sight.

'Where are they going?' asked Jo, trembling. Her new-found bravado had evaporated completely.

'To the Catacombs, probably.' Quinn had an expression of distaste as he explained further. 'Nowadays it's an exclusive club for the rich and powerful. In the nineteenth century it was where the canal horses and pit-ponies were stabled.'

'Pit-ponies?' queried Jo.

'They were used to shunt railway wagons. If you look you'll notice cast iron grilles set in the road. They gave the poor animals in the tunnels beneath some light, at least.'

Jo remembered the terrible darkness of the tunnels she had recently explored, and shuddered. 'What do they do at this club, then?' she asked.

'On the surface, the normal things that appeal to the obscenely wealthy – wining, dining, seducing, deceiving. They've turned the canal basin into an underground lake and I hear it's all very elegant and exclusive. Just the kind of thing she would relish.' His voice was bitter. 'There are rumours, of course, that it's all just a cover for something worse.'

'Like what?' demanded Jo, but he would not be drawn. A short time later they headed back to the shop, both subdued and lost in thought.

After supper they played cards and chatted. Soon they were laughing again and the shadows of the afternoon seemed to have vanished. Quinn was back to his amiable, easy-going self, assisted by a bottle or two of wine.

When he seemed expansive and mellow Jo made her move. She could have emped him, but she knew she shouldn't. More to the point, his shield had stayed up since she glimpsed his secrets. 'What were you all studying at university?' she asked innocently.

He paused for a moment, then said, 'We were all taking Philosophy. Ali and Lethe were doing extra courses – all that memory stuff, as it turned out.'

'Did you have a gift?' asked Jo.

'Doesn't everyone?' he replied, teasing.

'I meant a special gift.'

He thought for a while. 'I might have been a healer,' he said at last. His voice was rueful. 'But I left college early.'

'Was the course too difficult for you?' asked Jo.

'It most certainly was not,' he replied, stung.

'Maybe the fees were too expensive,' she suggested, slyly provoking. 'Or were you kicked out?'

He was impatient now. He drained his glass of wine. 'For your information, young lady, it was nothing to do with money and I was not sent down. Your dear aunt was at the bottom of it, as it happens.'

'Why? Whatever did she do?' Jo resisted punching the air in triumph.

He sighed and poured another glass of wine. 'She ruined my life,' he said dramatically. 'With my willing help, of course. Did you know that Ali and I were sweethearts then?'

Jo shook her head rather than say 'No' out loud because that would have been a lie and her voice went funny when she told lies. But this was what she had seen the first night she met Quinn.

'Well. We were. We were going to get married after college. I've thought about it a lot since. But whatever Ali had, Lethe wanted. Including me.' He sighed. 'Lethe was sensational. And I was sensationally stupid. I dumped Ali. I broke her heart. God. I shouldn't be telling you this.' He looked distracted. 'Once Lethe had got me away from Ali, she grew tired of me pretty quickly, I can tell you. I was besotted with her, though, and I just let her walk all over me. Then Ali started going out with Paul, and to no-one's surprise but mine Lethe decided to add him to her collection.'

Jo had glimpsed this, but not fully understood it.

Quinn was far back in the past now, re-living his memories. 'Lethe and I had a special place under a willow tree by the river. On Midsummer's Eve I thought I would surprise her with a romantic picnic – fairy lights in the trees; champagne; strawberries. The works. I went to get it all set up and it was me who got the surprise. She was already there. With Paul. And they weren't discussing Philosophy.'

More wine.

'I just bolted. I had an old camper van. I threw my stuff in it and I was gone. Within a matter of days I was in Greece, and that's where I stayed for nine years. I lived on the beach, sang in the tavernas, worked as a tour guide. It was a good life. But in the end I was homesick. So I came back.' He looked so sad. 'When I was first in Greece I used to try and emp Lethe all the time. We were never much good at it, though. I was desperate for news of her. Love-sick. I thought love justified what I did. So I empd Ali for news of Lethe. It was always easy between us when we were together. Soon as she realised I was emping, she shielded. But not before I learned that she was marrying Paul. I couldn't believe she'd forgiven him.'

'Perhaps she didn't know,' suggested Jo.

Quinn looked dubious. 'That's hard to imagine,' he said, 'given she can read most people like a book. And I'm sure Lethe would have wanted Ali to know, just to twist the knife. What kind of triumph would it be if Ali had no idea about it?'

Quinn paused, seeming to wrestle with whether to say something else. He spoke impulsively. 'In for a penny, in for a pound. There was something else I learned before Ali shut me out. Lethe was pregnant.'

Jo had not seen that coming. She was thunderstruck. 'But Aunt Lethe hasn't got any children,' she stammered.

'No.' said Quinn. 'Apparently not.'

Another thunderbolt hit Jo. 'Whose baby was she expecting?'

Quinn looked uncomfortable. 'At the time it suited me to think Paul was the baby's father. But over the years, well, I started to wonder....' His voice tailed off. His eyes were wet. Abruptly he stood up. He ruffled her hair. 'It's nearly sunrise, Jo. You need to go to sleep. I'm going for a walk. I need to clear my head.'

And he was gone.

Jo climbed into bed with her mind racing. She dutifully emped Em, but in her heart of hearts she thought she would never get to sleep. But she did, and her dreams were deep and dark.

Paul was sleeping. Matthew was dozing. Ali was wide awake. Calico purred on her lap, taking a break from her maternal duties. Sergeant glowered from his perch on Matthew's shoulder. His territory had been well and truly invaded. His protests ranged from turning his back on Matthew to refusing to eat at the same time as Calico to marking his territory defiantly. As a result he had felt lonely and hungry, then been roundly scolded by his beloved Matthew. And the intruders were still here. It was a lot to bear.

Ali was remembering a glorious summer's day on the river with Quinn. A day before her sister turned her jealous gaze in Ali's direction; a day that contained a proposal and a promise. 'We were so young,' she thought. 'And so happy. Or so I believed. But it wasn't enough for him. And she was stunning. She just took what she wanted.' Her eyes narrowed and her lips tightened. 'But she's not taking Jo.'

Matthew opened his eyes. 'Do you remember Mary Montgomery?' he asked.

'The name rings a bell. Wasn't she one of Lethe's tutors?' Matthew nodded. 'I never really knew her,' said Ali. 'I wasn't in her group and I can't remember much about her.'

Matthew looked sad. 'Hardly anyone does,' he said, 'not even the people who did know her well. Lethe did that. Mary was one of the finest lecturers we ever had. I think Lethe was her favourite pupil. But Mary realised that Lethe was drawn to working with dark forces, and tried to stop her. She threatened to report Lethe to the Principal, and that would have meant failure in her exams and inevitable expulsion.'

'What was Lethe doing that was so bad?'

'Seeking power for herself by bending the rules of her gift,' said Matthew. 'Finding ways to make people ask for what she wanted them to have. Tricking them into agreeing to forget what they needed to remember.'

'Creating dependency.' Ali remembered Matthew's teaching.

'Exactly,' agreed Matthew. 'The point is, there is mercy in oblivion, just as long as it is temporary. We need time to come to terms with terrible things. Oblivion, or sedation, or sleep all give our system the chance to deal with the unbearable. After a time, though, we need to look at the story of our life, and that of others, without denying the truth. So there needs to be an end to forgetting.'

'And a time for remembering,' said Ali.

'Which is your gift,' Matthew reminded her. 'Yours, and mine, which is why I was your mentor. The Remembrance. It is a subtle skill, Ali. Paul is improving all the time, thanks to you.'

Ali sighed deeply. 'But it is so slow! Lethe just wiped Paul with a gesture. I can't just wave my hand and bring back his memories before he is ready.'

'Well,' said Matthew slowly, 'if Lethe were you, she would try to do just that. She would use shock tactics, or drugs, or trickery to make him remember. And she would damage him, as she damaged Mary.'

'So what did happen to Mary?'

'Lethe wanted to erase the knowledge of her dark experiments from Mary's mind. I've thought about it a lot since and I still don't know how she found the power. She was no match for Mary. Anyway, something terrible happened, and Mary was never the same afterwards. She became confused, and rambling. Some people said she was mad.'

'I have no doubt that Lethe encouraged them to think that,' said Ali grimly.

Matthew nodded. 'From there it was a short step for Lethe to wipe Mary out of their minds completely. She visited everyone who had any connection with Mary and persuaded them that Mary was best forgotten.' His face was so sad. He wiped his eyes.

'But you remember her.'

Matthew's voice was contemptuous. 'It would take more than Lethe to make me forget Mary. It didn't stop her trying, though. But Lethe has no power over me, Ali, and neither can she deceive you into denying what is true.' Anger flashed across his face, then the sadness returned. 'But everyone else just forgot Mary. It was as if she ceased to exist. A non-person. She was like a shadow, and in the end she vanished.'

'Doesn't anyone know what happened to her?' asked Ali, wondering what else Lethe had done to people's memories without their true consent.

Matthew raised his hands helplessly. 'I wish I did,' he said. 'But I have been searching for her ever since.' He sighed deeply. 'Perhaps she doesn't want to be found. Sometimes I think she must have forgotten all about me.' As he spoke he was looking at a framed photograph on his desk.

'Is this her?' asked Ali. Matthew nodded. She studied the photograph. A tall, striking, confident woman laughed with a man who once had sniffed adventure on the wind, laughed when danger came calling and gambled it all for a woman's smile.

Chapter Eight – The Catacombs

When the alarm went off Jo was immediately wide awake. She went to the bathroom and laughed as she caught sight of her reflection and realised she'd slept in her makeup. She looked horrendous. Laughing to herself, she emped Em. *Rise.*

There was no reply.

She tried again. Still nothing.

Jo panicked. She raced from the bedroom, looking for Quinn, but all she found was her breakfast and a note saying BACK SOON. Frantic with worry, Jo paced back and forth before deciding she could not afford to waste another second. She flung her clothes on and pelted to the door.

Jo set off towards the pillbox. She tried to persuade herself that Em might have fallen asleep, but a slow dread was creeping over her. She was nearly at the diner when she realised that she had not left Quinn a note. She emped him but there was no reply.

She had intended never to go back again to the tunnels. Her hands were shaking as she opened the padlock. 'Think', she said to herself, and she put the padlock in her pocket so no-one could lock the door behind her. As she made her way back towards Em's store-room she kept trying to emp her, but there was nothing.

Now she was descending the steep staircase. Nearly there.

The sound of laughter made her stop in her tracks. To the left of her there was a grating. She looked through it, down into Em's room.

It was chaos. Everything was overturned – all Em's precious books and treasures were scattered round the room. There was no sign of Em but two figures, a bleach-blonde girl and a powerfully built black boy were circling and laughing, trying to hit each other with Em's beautiful velvet cushions. Dust and feathers flew everywhere as the old covers split open.

The girl was half chanting, half singing a childish refrain, 'The old witch is gone! The old witch is gone!

We had a row, she had to go, and this is our place now!’

Jo watched the two children having a pillow-fight, jumping and laughing and sneezing. She knew she was looking at Lucy and Zebo.

Even as she looked, the two happy children seemed to disappear. In their place were two young adults and there was a hunger and need written on their faces that made Jo look away. Almost against her will, her gaze was drawn inexorably back and she saw Lucy take off her top. Livid welts, from a dog’s lead, were clearly visible. On Zebo’s back, small, circular burns, neatly and precisely placed, spelled out his initials. Zebo pulled Lucy to him and tenderly kissed her scars. They fell upon each other like wild animals, and Jo was back up the stairs and outside, gasping, trying to catch her breath.

As Jo raced back to find Quinn, she kept wondering what had happened to Em. She’d had a truth-flash of Lucy and Em fighting, but it was gone in a moment. Then, unbidden, a picture of the sump flooded into her mind. Jo blocked it out. She ran faster.

Back in Em’s room, Lucy was sleeping. Zebo got up, and tiptoed out of the room. He headed back to the deep level, where his and Lucy’s things were stashed. He was keen to move in straight away. He whistled happily as he took the stairs two at a time.

At the bottom of the stairs he was surprised to see the plant room door slightly ajar. The unearthly purple glow spilled out. He went to close the door, but something was blocking it – something that looked like a heap of old rags. ‘Better check this out,’ he said to himself, and opened the door fully.

Zebo found Em, lifeless and blood-stained. She had been brutally beaten. Em had clearly fought for her life. Zebo’s face was grim as he saw her fingers tightly curled round tufts of hair. Tufts of bleach-blonde hair.

As Zebo stood there, stunned with shock and disbelief, his mind was racing. He’d deal with Lucy later, but for now, he’d have to find somewhere to hide

the body. No-one else could know about this. The sump room was the obvious place. He shuddered. It would have to do. Steeling himself, he bent down and tried to lift Em. She was heavier than he thought, and he grunted with the exertion.

He pulled her to her feet, and held her like a rag doll, her head lolling on his shoulder. Zebo had not cried for years, but he was perilously close. Em had been OK. He hauled her onto his shoulder, and then he heard the noise.

It was barely more than a whisper. It might have been a word, or just a sigh. But it was enough to tell Zebo that Em was still alive. Just. He carefully put her down, closed the plant room door, and ran to the deep level, looking for Wheezy.

He found him in his usual place, painting on the walls of the shelter. The images were highly detailed, and deeply disturbing. Zebo looked away hurriedly. 'Get Reg! Tell him it's urgent.'

'OK.' Wheezy didn't waste words, neither was he particularly curious about the world outside his head. He just did what he was told.

A short while later Zebo ran back to where Lucy was still sleeping. He roughly shook her awake. At first she smiled to see him, then, at the sight of his face, the smile disappeared.

'What the hell did you do to her?' demanded Zebo.

'Who?' she stalled, avoiding his gaze.

'You know who. What did you do to Em?'

'I got rid of the old bag. I'd put up with her for long enough, acting like she was in charge. Time for you and me to run the place.'

Zebo shook his head. He threw a battered old suitcase at her feet. 'Get up,' he snarled. 'Take your things and get out now.'

'You're joking!'

'No, I'm not. You crossed the line, Lucy. You can't stay here.'

'But where will I go?'

He shrugged. 'You'll find somewhere. The Vermin can always use another killer.'

Without another word Lucy picked up her suitcase, turned on her heel and was gone.



Jo was almost back at Quinn's shop, her mind full of worries about Em, when a terrible thought stopped her in her tracks. With Em out of the picture, her dreams would have been wide open for Sebastian. Even now he would be on his way, hunting her down. She had to warn Quinn, then find another hiding place.

She arrived back at the shop and knew at once she was too late. The place was wrecked – posters torn, records smashed. She had been gone less than half an hour. She must have missed them by moments. The cardboard cut-out was broken and twisted. There was only one word on the cue-card. RUN. Quinn had tried to warn her. What must he have thought when he found she was gone?

An orange feather lay on the ground. Jo picked it up and tucked it in her belt. Tears filled her eyes. She called Quinn's name, but she knew there would be no reply.

Something was happening by the canal. A crowd was gathering, surging towards the bank. And one figure, spidery-black with a moon-like face, was moving in the opposite direction to the crowd, heading straight towards her.

Jo just froze. He was almost upon her and she had no strength left to think or move. He came right up to her, and then, to her amazement, he roughly pushed her to one side and was gone.

'He didn't recognise me,' she thought, and relief washed over her.

Then she joined the bystanders at the canal edge and watched as they pulled Quinn's body out of the water.

Everything seemed to fall away from her. In the middle of the crowd she felt completely alone, surrounded by white, swirling emptiness.

Voices filtered through the mist. 'Must have had one too many.' 'Did he fall or was he pushed?'

Jo tried to see but her vision was blurred by tears. Nothing was clear, nothing was as it seemed. The world was shifting and she could not keep her balance.

Somebody said, 'It's that bloke from the record shop.'

Jo started to cry. The swirling mist cleared slowly, and people began drifting away. One or two of them noticed Jo's distress and her dishevelled state, but that just made them move faster.

She went back to the empty shop. She packed her rucksack, dried her eyes and tried to think. One thing was sure. There was no more protection. Strange how that almost came as a relief. She was sick of running, sick of hiding. A murderous anger she had never experienced was filling her from head to toe.

She didn't really have a plan yet, but she was thinking on her feet and her feet took her towards the Catacombs.

The forget-me-not blue barge was moored near the entrance to the club. An elegant stairway swept up from the canal-path to the marble foyer. Jo looked back the way she had come, and there was an old metal ladder leading down to the tow-path. She could see the dark archway of a tunnel and guessed it would lead under the building.

There was hardly anyone about. Choosing her moment Jo climbed over the railing and shinned down the ladder. She moved into the tunnel. Dark shadows surrounded her.

Jo didn't know what hit her. Her feet were kicked from under her and she crashed to the ground. She kicked and struggled and bit but she was overpowered. A skinny figure was straddling her.

'Sebastian,' she thought, revulsion turning her blood to ice.

In your dreams, kid emped a voice she had never heard. She had never heard the voice but she had seen the soul and the terrible pictures came back as she looked into the face of a blond boy who stole apples and tortured animals for fun

'Right,' said the boy. 'I know you've seen what I can do. So you know there's no point in running. Now get up.'

Jo got up. As soon as she was on her feet she started to run for it anyway. She was no match for the wiry, agile boy, however, and he yanked her arm up behind her so brutally she cried out in pain.

The blond boy laughed. 'I'll break your arm if I have to,' he said. He shoved Jo ahead of him deep into the labyrinth of tunnels, gripping her arm tightly. They travelled in silence. There were so many twists and turns Jo soon had no idea at all where they were. Every time they passed under a grating, walking through shafts of silvery light which sliced up the grey shadows of the catacombs, she heard Quinn's voice in her mind, telling her about the canal horses and pit ponies.

Thinking about Quinn made her feel desolate. She had grown to care for him so much. But there was something else troubling her. 'Now no-one knows where I am,' she thought and she felt agitated and anxious. Instinctively she went to touch her locket for reassurance. Then she made a devastating discovery. The chain on her locket must have broken during the struggle. She had to find it.

'I'm going to be sick,' gasped Jo. Indeed, she did feel sick. Sick at heart.

'Gross. Just get on with it, then,' said the boy, distaste evident in his voice.

Under cover of retching loudly, Jo searched desperately on the ground. She couldn't bear to be parted from something which meant so much to her family.

Her search was fruitless. The locket had undoubtedly fallen off when she was first captured. In the end she had to give up. But even as she did, the tiniest sliver of an idea came to her. Her spirits lifted a little.

'Better now,' she said, then as she began to stand, half bent over, she charged at the boy, head butted him in the stomach and sent him sprawling.

She ran for dear life. She had no idea where she was going but she just wanted to be free of the creepy, sadistic kid.

Then she heard his footsteps behind her, and she ran harder.

She heard a derisive laugh, then felt something sting her on the side of the neck. 'A wasp?' she thought. 'Down here?' She tried to brush it away, but it was sticking into her and she just had to slow down. Her thoughts spiralled out of control and her head began to spin. Her tongue felt swollen and her words were trapped somewhere a long way away. She was telling her legs to run but they wouldn't obey her. She sank slowly to the ground.

He gripped her arm cruelly and hauled her to her feet. 'And I thought you were going to be sensible. Get moving. And don't make me drag you.' He prodded and pushed her and kicked her as she shambled ahead of him.

'Jelly,' said Jo thickly, but then she was puzzled as to why. The word kept repeating in her mind. 'Jelly, jelly, jelly.' Sometimes it boomed. Sometimes it was a whisper. It was a little lost word and Jo wanted to cry. It was a big pink word with sparkly feathers and Jo wanted to laugh. It belonged to another lost word, a long blue word.

'Legs,' she said triumphantly. 'Jelly eggs. Scrambled legs.'

The boy laughed sardonically. 'First time you've ever had Fog, by the look of it. It'll wear off. Eventually.'

They continued on in silence until the boy stopped outside a heavy reinforced door.

'Right,' he said. 'Here we are.'

He forced open the door with a grunt and pushed Jo inside.

Chapter Nine – Madame Mirabel

The room was a small cavern – an Aladdin's cave used as a wardrobe by a deranged fairy. Rails of theatrical costumes lined the walls – a rainbow of silks and velvets and brocades. Feathered hats, sequined masks and jewelled waistcoats. After the gloom of the tunnel the dazzling colour hurt Jo's eyes.

There were mirrors everywhere and lights reflected and sparkled and flashed from their silvery coldness, showing a pale, haunted girl who could hardly stand and a boy with hooded eyes and bony hands.

Sitting at a sewing machine was an enormously fat old woman. Thick white makeup covered her face. On her cheeks were red rouge hearts, echoing the blood red Cupid's bow of her painted lips. Peacock blue eye shadow coated her eyelids, and silver false eyelashes fluttered coquettishly beneath an improbable blonde, bouffant wig. 'Like a pantomime dame,' thought Jo, appalled.

'Oooh, Darren,' said the apparition. 'Haven't you done well for your old granny! This is a good 'un. Had a bit of medicine, has she? Better get her a chair, then. Don't want her going all wibbly wobbly on us. Struggled, did she? Got a bit of spirit? I like a bit of spirit... rum, brandy, whisky, you name it!' She cackled at her own joke, revealing a mouth full of impossibly white, sparkling teeth. 'Have you had a bite to eat, our Darren?' He shook his head. She tutted, and produced a big, black Gladstone bag. 'There's some grub in there. Got to keep your strength up. You'll be off hunting again directly.' He nodded agreement.

'Wibbly wobbly,' said Jo.

'Yes, dear,' said Darren's dreadful granny indulgently. 'But I haven't introduced myself! Where are my manners? Welcome to my world! *Madame Mirabel's Theatrical Emporium*. And I am Madame Mirabel! I've always loved the theatre, ducky. The drama, darling, and the spectacle. Quite divine. And me and Darren, we're on to a nice little earner – he rounds 'em up, and I dresses 'em up! Proper family business.' Her tone

became confiding. 'Course, I brought him up, you know, ever since his mother... Well, least said, soonest mended.'

Somewhere in all the swirling colours and smoke in her mind Jo saw the silhouette of a woman dangling from a noose. Then the black silhouette wrapped itself round Darren like a shadow, like a shroud.

'Better not to talk about that,' said the old horror. 'And he never does, do you, our Darren? He never speaks about nothing. Never heard him say a word from that day to this. Shock, you see. The devil's darning needle stitched his lips tight.'

'Never speaks,' repeated Jo. It was supposed to be a question; a contradiction even, but it came out as an echo.

'Bless him. And as for that father of his, well, what a waste of space he turned out to be. A bit handy with his belt, wasn't he, our Darren. Still, we showed him in the end, didn't we, ducks. He won't be laying a finger on you again, will he? Or anyone else, for that matter.'

Jo closed her eyes and saw three shadow puppets on the inside of her eyelids. A small, skinny boy and a huge old woman doing terrible things to a broken marionette. Horror crawled over her, turning her blood to ice. She forced her eyes open and looked at Darren.

You keep your trap shut, he empd. Or you're next.

'He's a good lad,' said Mirabel fondly. 'Oh, he can be a bit wayward, but that's boys for you. Just as well your old granny loves you or where would you be, eh? Now then, Darren, you have a little nap after your lunch before you go back to work.'

It wasn't a suggestion but an order. Darren obediently curled up in an old leather armchair and closed his eyes. 'Now, where was I? Oh yes. I was telling you about our little business. Not the one where we sorts out swine like his old man, but our own little bit of show business and glamour. Darren finds the talent; I arrange a bit of a do and lucky old you gets to be a star for the night! You'll be performing in front of

anyone who's anyone! As soon as I saw you, I knew you were a natural.'

'Not me,' said Jo flatly. Her words were back, but each one was an effort. She was still emerging from the colours and the smoke. 'Can't sing. Can't act. Can't tell jokes.'

Mirabel laughed. 'Ooh, everyone gets a bit of stage fright. 'It's only natural. But you'll be fine. Trust me. I have an eye for talent. I only select la crème de la crème, sweetie.' She looked at Jo appraisingly. 'Now, to business. We must sort you out a costume. It's a gala night tonight and you need to look your best. For a start, whoever cut your hair needs shooting.'

Tears stung Jo's eyes.

Mirabel rolled her eyes. 'Oh, don't be such a cry-baby. I can make something of it, I suppose. Now strip.'

'No.' Jo's voice was adamant on the outside and shaky on the inside. She voiced her deep fear, trying to not sound afraid. 'Is all this about sex?'

Mirabel laughed and laughed until she began to wheeze. 'With that face? And that figure? I don't think so, little girl. Whatever do you take me for? Now, I said strip. Get on with it.'

Jo's words were shaky, but she held her ground. 'Not in front of you and Darren. I'll get changed behind the curtain.'

Mirabel smiled indulgently. 'Oh, my! A shy one! Well, they will love that. Suit yourself. Believe me, I wouldn't cross the road to see you naked, little girl. You are not my type at all. And Darren's fast asleep so he's not bothered.'

She pulled the curtain around Jo and began gathering armfuls of clothes. 'I'm thinking nursery rhymes here. *Little Bo-Peep*, perhaps. Powder blue, I think. Try these on, then come out and give me a twirl.'

Another echo of Quinn and again, tears threatened. Jo was still feeble from the drug. Her limbs were heavy and weak. Her reflection showed a stranger with dark shadows round her eyes.

There was something wrong, something missing. Something knocking on the door of her memory. Her mind was working slowly, but her body knew the answer. Her hand flew to her neck. Her locket was missing. She couldn't bear it.

She risked emping her mother. Only two words. ***Locate locket.***

'I haven't got all day,' snapped the old woman. 'Get on with it.'

It took forever to go from Goth-girl to Dresden Shepherdess. Jo's fingers fumbled clumsily with buttons and buckles. She emerged with a face like thunder clouds in a summer sky. She felt a complete idiot.

'Lawks!' shrieked Mirabel. 'Them boots will never do! And that blue does nothing for you whatsoever. Makes you look like a week-old haddock. Hmm. What would Contrary Mary wear, I wonder? Or Lucy Lockett?'

Jo jumped then stilled herself. 'Just words,' she told herself fiercely. 'Just random words. She knows nothing.'

'I know!' Mirabel looked pleased with herself. 'You'd make a darling Little Miss Muffet and we could ask Sebastian to play the spider! He'd be perfect!' Jo shuddered. Mirabel feigned surprise. 'Don't you want to play with Sebastian? But he knows so many jolly games. Spoil-sport.'

The inane prattle was driving Jo crazy. She had no idea what was going to happen, but she was pretty sure it would be unpleasant. However, that was in the future. Right now she just wanted some peace and quiet, so she could close her eyes and sleep, but there was no chance of that. Mirabel thrust a heap of red satin and velvet into Jo's arms.

*'The Queen of Hearts,
She made some tarts,
All on a summer's day,'*

she trilled in a sing-song voice.

How Jo longed for the old woman to just shut up. One minute she was thinking the thought, the next

minute, horrified, she heard the words echo all around her, spoken out loud.

Mirabel slapped Jo lazily on both cheeks. 'Well, well! What an ungrateful little madam! Needs to learn some manners, don't she or else she'll soon find out what Mirabel does to cheeky girls.' The old woman spoke lightly but always a thin scarlet thread of menace ran through her words, like blood from a paper cut. She continued her rhyme.

*'The Knave of Hearts,
He stole the tarts and took them clean away.
The King of Hearts called for the tarts
And beat the Knave full sore,
The Knave of Hearts....'*

Jo, struggling out of her shepherdess costume, suddenly realised there was silence in the room. At the same moment, she also sensed that Mirabel was standing close behind her. She whirled round to face her. To her intense satisfaction, Mirabel was clearly horrified. She rallied quickly, however.

'How did a kid like you get tattoos like that?' she demanded.

'They're not tattoos,' said Jo, noticing again the unexpected relief in reaching the end of the line and having nowhere to hide. 'Haven't you heard of Blaschko Lines?'

'Yes, but I've forgotten,' lied Mirabel. 'Remind me.'

'It's a rare genetic condition.' The drug was still affecting Jo. It made her head hurt to try and concentrate. 'They show up more under ultraviolet light.'

'So you're all stripy. Just like a tiger!' observed Mirabel happily. 'I'm going to call you Tygirl!'

'Oh goodie,' said Jo wearily.

'Would you prefer Freak?' The menace returned briefly. Jo shook her head.

'I'm going to create a whole new costume just for you,' continued Mirabel. 'All oranges, golds and ambers. Absolutely divine!'

'I don't want anyone to see the lines,' said Jo, hesitantly. She did not want to have to ask a favour.

Mirabel put her head on one side. 'You'll have to ask nicely, then. Pretty, please.'

'It doesn't matter.' Jo wasn't planning on begging.

Mirabel tutted. 'Still forgetting our manners, are we?

She moved like a snake, despite her size. Seemingly from nowhere a hatpin was in her hand, the point pressed to Jo's throat.

'Now say it, Freak, or I'll give you some more stripes.' The point went deeper.

'Please, Mirabel.'

'That would be Madame Mirabel.'

Jo gritted her teeth. 'Please, Madame Mirabel.'

The hatpin was withdrawn. A soft, flabby hand stroked Jo's neck. 'Good girl,' cooed Mirabel. 'It will be our little secret. Trust me.'

Jo felt a deep loathing for the old woman. She watched, her anger smouldering, as Mirabel gathered up lengths of material and began piecing them together. She had a mouthful of pins and seemed engrossed. Jo looked longingly at the door. Her strength was returning. Maybe she could make a run for it.

'Don't even think of it,' said Mirabel, 'cos our Darren's awake now and he's always a bit grumpy when he wakes up. You don't want to get our Darren cross when he's already grumpy. Some people think he oughtta be sent away 'cos he's a bit evil then. But we rub along alright, me and Darren, don't we, dearie?' He nodded. Jo saw worms and maggots seething where his heart should be. Mirabel ruffled his hair. 'Anyway, my boy, you've got important work to do, so time you were off. Give your old granny a kiss.'

The red lips puckered and the peacock eyelids fluttered shut as Mirabel raised her face expectantly. Darren didn't move. The red lips tightened and the peacock eyelids flew open. 'Spiders, Darren,' she said in a conversational tone of voice. 'Spiders scuttling across your face when you're asleep.'

Darren crumpled. In her mind's eye Jo saw flashes of red pierce his head and chest. She gasped at his pain.

'Just a little kiss, Darren. Or you know what.' Reluctantly Darren kissed the raddled old face. He did not look at Jo. 'Good boy. Oh, Darren, better chain her up before you go. She's coming out of it and I don't really want to give her any more medicine. It'll spoil her performance.' She produced a pair of handcuffs from her bag.

Jo struggled, but she was still weak and she was easily subdued. In no time she was shackled to a radiator. Darren opened the door, ready to go.

'Happy hunting, Darren,' said Mirabel. 'Now off you go.' The door closed behind him.

'He can't abide spiders,' said Mirabel in a satisfied manner. 'Dunno why, but it works a treat. Bit of a tender spot. Everyone's got one. Now what's yours, I wonder?' She cocked her head on one side and studied Jo carefully, then laughed a throaty, wheezy laugh. 'Ooh, dearie, dearie me,' she said. 'Slithery, slidy, slippery.' She hissed the words. 'Snakes. Snakes with their poison fangs; snakes crawling over you; snakes curling round you and crushing the breath out of you.'

'Shut her out of your mind,' Jo told herself, but the words crept in anyway and she could feel the cool, heavy body of the snake wrapping itself around her and panic rose in her, taking away her breath. Terror twined with the panic so she was paralysed with fear; helpless and speechless. Then the snake was gone and Mirabel laughed.

'Now you knows what I can do,' said Mirabel, her self-satisfaction evident. 'I expect you'll be behaving yourself now so I can get on with my sewing.'

Mirabel cut and stitched, sewed on sequins, added trimmings. She prattled endlessly as the costume was fitted, altered and re-fitted ad nauseum. At one point she disappeared, taking an assortment of outfits with her. 'Mustn't forget your co-star,' she said, waving gaily before locking Jo in.

The moment the sound of her footsteps disappeared Jo looked all around for another way out. She hoped for a trap door, or a hatch in the ceiling; she moved as many of the rails of clothes as her handcuffs allowed to reveal the walls behind. Nothing. Her frantic efforts were futile, and at last she gave up. She was bitterly disappointed.

Jo felt weary to the bone. It was so peaceful without Mirabel, and the room was so warm and stuffy. Traces of the drug still coursed in her veins and Jo just had to close her eyes. Caught as she was between Mirabel and Sebastian, she gave up resisting sleep and curled up on a pile of old costumes.

Jo slept.

Ali shook her head helplessly.

Matthew was watching her. 'What happened?' he asked.

'Jo emped me. She said *Locate locket*. I know what she means, but it's no use.'

Matthew looked puzzled.

Ali explained. 'Paul can find things that are lost. Not people, but things. He's a tracker. You know he's part Native American.'

'From the Lakota tribe,' remembered Matthew. 'His father was a tracker as well, wasn't he?'

'Yes,' said Ali. 'One of the Shadow Wolves. You know, when we married, and I went from Ali Lake to Ali Lakota. Lethe was so jealous, she just had to change her name as well and become Lethe Lacuna.'

'And lacunar amnesia became her speciality,' observed Matthew, thinking of Mary. He brought himself back to the present. 'So what's this about a locket?'

'Paul's particularly good with metal. It's best of all when it's something he knows well, something he has handled. His grandmother had a beautiful silver locket and he put a picture of us inside and gave it to Jo last Christmas.'

'And Jo thinks if he finds the locket, he'll find her,' said Matthew slowly. A thought struck him. 'But you know where she is. She's with Quinn.'

Ali shook her head. 'I'm afraid that something very bad has happened. I can't reach him. And now I have no idea where Jo is. So I need Paul to help me find her. But I don't know if he's up to it.'

Matthew's face was sombre. 'He's making progress, but he's nowhere near ready. He still hasn't said a word.'

'No,' agreed Ali. 'But I'm going to try anyway.'

In her handbag Ali had a wallet with several pictures of Paul and Jo. In one they were laughing and pulling a Christmas cracker. The locket was clearly visible. Since that terrible night she had shown the photos to Paul over and over again, hoping to break through to his lost self. All he ever did was smile gently and look puzzled.

He was watching a cartoon on the television. She marched in and turned it off. She spoke sharply. After days of careful coaxing, it felt invigorating.

'Paul,' she said. 'I need you to concentrate.' She put the photograph in front of him and pointed at the locket. 'Where is this?'

He shook his head and looked sad.

'Just try,' she said harshly. 'Make a damn effort.'

He looked wounded, not by her words but her tone of voice. He reached out to stroke her face. She pushed his hand away and shouted.

'Just find her. Just find Jo!'

She pummelled his chest, crying out in desperation and rage, not caring if she hurt him, just wanting to get through to him. He looked bewildered.

At last she stopped, exhausted. She looked into his troubled face and was overcome with remorse. 'Oh, Paul,' she said. 'I am so sorry.' Then she started to cry. She leaned against him and sobbed; great wracking sobs.

He cradled her in his arms and rocked her. Her hair smelt wonderful, like a garden in summer. He wanted her to smile again. He stared at the photograph and

tried so hard to think. But his thoughts were flying around like frightened birds so he had to be very quiet or they would fly away and never come back. So he was quiet as a mouse. And they did fly back and circled him shyly. And then he tried to find the words, but they were swimming away from him like little silver fishes so he needed a net. So he made a net from the pretty lady's beautiful copper hair and concentrated with all his might and he managed to catch one little fish before they all slipped away to the deep, dark ocean.

'Round house,' he said.

'Round house?' repeated Matthew.

Ali was gasping with relief. 'It's near Camden Lock,' she said. 'The Roundhouse. An old engine shed, turned into an arts centre. We all went to the pantomime there.'

She kissed Paul. He looked exhausted. 'Forgive me,' she whispered. He stroked her face, closed his eyes and slept.

Ali turned to Matthew, her face determined. She was about to say something when he spoke.

'I know,' he said. 'You have to go. You have to look for her. It's alright. I'll take care of Paul, and Sergeant will keep a watchful, if somewhat wary, eye on Calico and the kittens.'

He held her close. 'Bring her home,' he said. 'Just bring her home.'



'Catching up on your beauty sleep?' taunted Mirabel. 'Time to get ready for your star performance, Tygirl! She pulled Jo to her feet.

'Isn't there going to be a rehearsal?' asked Jo.

'What, and spoil the fun?'

'But I have no idea what I'm meant to do.'

'Just be yourself. Like I said, ducks, you're a natural. You'll catch on soon enough. Right. Let's sort out this hair.'

'I'll never complain about my appearance again,' thought Jo as once again she endured being transformed. Mirabel wove golden extensions into the black spikes Quinn had created. Delicate shading on

her face suggested a tawny tigress. Then there was the costume.

It was a marvel. Over a simple golden tunic ribbons of orange silk, deep brown lace and amber chiffon floated and twisted with every move Jo made. The costume suggested the sinuous movement of the tigress stalking her prey and Jo couldn't take her eyes off her reflection.

The words just burst out of her. 'You are so talented,' she said. 'This is beautiful, Mirabel.'

'You'll do,' said Mirabel, clearly pleased with herself. 'Time to go. Now you be a credit to me, you hear?'

They were back in the tunnel. It was chilly and Jo shivered. 'Not far now,' said Mirabel, opening a door.

They were in a huge round cavern. In the middle of the cavern was a circular cage. Mirabel gripped Jo's arm firmly and pushed her inside. Jo struggled and fought but she wasn't strong enough. Mirabel pulled a lever, the door closed and the cage slowly began to rise.

'What is it actors say before a show?' said Mirabel. 'Oh, I remember.'

Her smile was sinister.

'Break a leg.'

Chapter Ten – The Arena

The cage rose slowly. Jo clenched her fists tight and made herself stand straight. She vowed she would face whatever awaited her with dignity, at least. The cage was at the ceiling level of the cavern and continued to rise, emerging from the gloom into a place so brightly lit that Jo had to shield her eyes from the dazzle. She was temporarily blinded, but could hear a mechanism clicking. The cage split open all around her, and she stumbled out.

She was alone, standing in the glare of a circle of brilliant, powerful spotlights. Coloured lights swept over her as she stood, blinking and confused, in the centre of a huge empty space. Vast mirror balls spun and twinkled above her head; ultraviolet fluorescent tubes glimmered and glowed.

She could hear the cage close then descend behind her. There was a drum roll, a trumpet fanfare, then silence. Jo was still unable to see a thing.

The silence seemed unending. Then, to her amazement, Jo heard a small noise – a sound that was almost friendly. Someone out there giggled. Then someone else joined in, and another and another. Now there was laughter, and the laughter grew and grew – great waves of it, washing over Jo and leaving her bewildered and humiliated.

Silence again, then just the slightest snigger erupted and another wave of laughter came crashing down. Jo was scarlet with mortification. 'Hold your head high,' she told herself.

Behind and below her she could hear the cage mechanism creaking into life. Her eyes were growing accustomed to the blinding lights and she could see she was in an arena, a huge amphitheatre, packed with tier upon tier of spectators. The jewels of the glamorous women sparkled and glittered as the mirror balls turned; the white shirts of the immaculately tailored men gleamed in the ultraviolet light. Every member of the audience wore an elaborate mask. In the unearthly

light their eyes were startling, almost alien, glowing electric blue.

Directly opposite Jo was a podium draped with silver curtains; clearly where the guests of honour would be seated. As Jo watched, a beautiful, elegant woman in an iridescent jade and turquoise gown and a mask of peacock feathers stepped to the podium amid thunderous applause. Her companion, a short, balding man wearing a mask based on a scorpion, was solicitous and attentive.

The woman was Lethe. Her eyes flicked over Jo with no sign of recognition.

The cage had returned and opened like an enormous metal flower. Jo stared as another girl walked out and stood, proud and self-assured, as the cage descended and a trapdoor closed over it. In spite of her apparent confidence Jo could sense she was equally bewildered.

Mirabel had had a field day with the costume for this girl. White furry pom-poms and shiny red ribbons gave the appearance of an over-sized French poodle. From the outside view, Jo would have said she had never seen this girl before in her life. The inside view was another matter, however and, with a sinking heart, Jo recognised Lucy.

Suddenly an oily, unctuous voice boomed out, echoing round the arena.

'Ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests, welcome!'

An expectant silence fell. The ingratiating voice continued in a tone of voice that managed to be sinister and playful at the same time.

*'Tonight, relax from all your cares
Leave the outside world behind
Our secret celebration
Will help you to unwind.'*

*Fresh talent will delight you all
On Tygirl's debut night!
Beware the velvet paws and fangs
Of Tygirl, shining bright!*

*A rival worthy of the fight
Half girl, half dog it seems,
Lucinda's bark, Lucinda's bite
Will come to you in dreams.*

*We long to entertain you!
Now all the bets are in!
The stars are waiting for their cue
So let the games begin!'*

Another roll of drums, another fanfare, then out of nowhere, it seemed, moving like the rushing wind, Lucy came at Jo full pelt and knocked her to the ground. Jo just sat there, winded. Everything felt unreal. 'This isn't happening,' thought Jo. But it was. Tears came to her eyes. Laughter billowed round the arena.

'Get up, you dozy cow,' hissed Lucy. 'This crowd is bound to turn nasty if they don't get some action soon.'

Jo got up. Immediately Lucy was on her like a terrier, yanking her hair and kicking her shins. Jo curled over into a ball, shielding her face with her arms. A storm of punches rained down on her back. Lucy put her face close to Jo's. 'Don't just take it, dumbo. Fight back or we'll both be for it.'

Jo felt foolishly slow on the uptake. They wanted her to fight? But she had never punched or hit another person in her entire life. She clambered slowly to her feet and an expectant hush fell on the crowd. Lucy danced from side to side in front of her, jabbing Jo's face with sharp little punches. Jo felt as if everything was happening in slow motion. She raised her fists, trying to remember if she should keep her thumbs in or out, and aimed a blow at Lucy's chest. Lucy nimbly stepped to one side and, Jo, meeting no resistance, overbalanced and went sprawling face first. The crowd roared with laughter.

Jo staggered to her feet. Lucy was nowhere to be seen. Jo looked around, fearful of where the next blow was coming from. The audience, able to see that Lucy was just immediately behind Jo, staying on her blind

spot, treated it like a children's pantomime. 'She's behind you!' they shrieked, as Jo twisted and turned.

'Say, Oh no, she isn't,' ordered Lucy, giving Jo a sharp kick to emphasise the point.

Jo was mute. There was a slight restlessness in the audience now, and Jo heard one or two boos.

Another kick, and another. 'Just say it!'

Jo just said it.

'Oh yes, she is!' they roared, delighted, and suddenly Lucy leapt on Jo's back, her forearm pressed against Jo's windpipe, pressing harder and harder, squeezing tighter and tighter.

Jo could hardly breathe, and all the while Lucy stuck to her like a limpet, kicking her in the side.

Jo had to shake her off. She grabbed Lucy's left foot in both hands and twisted it as hard as she could. She bent the foot back until she heard a grunt of pain and Lucy loosened her grip. Jo spun round hard, bucking and rearing until her rider was dislodged and went sprawling awkwardly to the ground.

Roars of approval rose from the crowd as Lucy sat there, holding her ankle, her face a mask of pain. Jo stood watching, feeling sick. Had she broken Lucy's ankle? This was crazy. She reached out a hand to help Lucy up. 'I'm not hurt, stupid,' snarled Lucy. 'Just putting on a show,' and with that she leapt to her feet and charged Jo like a bull with a matador.

This time it was Jo who side-stepped and Lucy went flying. She lay face down on the ground, and Jo seized the moment and straddled Lucy, pinning her down. The crowd went wild and Jo had an overwhelming sense of a huge beast, hungry for blood, eager for the kill. She could barely think, let alone emp, but her reading of the audience filled her with a cold, creeping terror. How was this going to end?

Lucy wriggled beneath her, trying to slip free. Suddenly she twisted her body violently, and they came face to face. Lucy's nails raked Jo's cheek. A vicious punch split her lip. As Jo recoiled, tasting blood on her tongue, Lucy pushed her to the ground and, kneeling

on her chest, gripping her by the ears, she began to bang Jo's head against the stone floor.

All Jo could see were waves of darkness, flashes of light and streaks of red. All she could hear was the roar, the blood-lust of the crowd, on their feet now, baying like hounds.

Jo blacked out.



A distraught, copper-haired woman, her prettiness marred by tiredness and worry, was standing, suitcase in hand, looking in the window of her favourite shop. The door was locked, and there was no sign of the owner. Through the window she could see all the precious stock smashed, torn and scattered beyond repair. A broken cardboard cut-out, bearing the word RUN on a cue card, looked up at her impassively.

Ali turned away, sick to the core of her being. What had happened to Quinn? And where was Jo?

With only one small clue to guide her, she walked towards the Roundhouse. And then it hit her. Wave upon wave of pain and terror. And through it all, Jo's voice, calling for her, crying for her, desperately reaching out for her as the nightmare engulfed her and the darkness descended.



Somewhere there was the sound of a bell ringing.

As she rose through the layers of darkness and pain, Jo realised Lucy had gone. She was on a stool at the side of the auditorium, and someone was cleaning her face with a warm flannel and giving her sips of water.

'You little scamps! Spoiling all my lovely work!' The voice was all too familiar. Jo opened her eyes to see Mirabel making repairs to her costume. 'Still, you're putting on a good show for the punters, and that's what matters. Right. Better go and sort out Dog-Girl's pom-poms.'

'Is it over?' croaked Jo.

'Bless you!' laughed Mirabel. 'Can't have a show without an interval. It'll be Round Two when things really gets going. Don't worry. Our Darren's got

summat to make it a bit easier for you.' And off she went, over to where Jo could see Lucy waiting.

Jo was relieved that Lucy hadn't recognised her. At the moment there was nothing particularly personal about Lucy's violence but that would surely change if she remembered that Jo could see the things that Lucy kept hidden deep inside.

A hand thrust a glass of water and a pill at her. **Take it,** Darren empd. **You'll need it.** She looked mistrustful. **It's just a pain-killer,** he empd again, not unkindly.

Jo took the pill. 'Thank you.' Then she asked the question which had been niggling at her. 'You can speak,' she said. 'I know you can. So why don't you speak to your grandmother?'

His hooded eyes were haunted. **She thinks she can take whatever she wants. But my thoughts and my words, well, they're mine. She can make me grunt, or cry, or squeal, but she can't make me speak. It's all I have.**

Then he was gone, and Jo looked round at the audience. The baying animal was docile now, sipping wine, laughing and chatting like a perfectly normal group of people having a perfectly normal night out. But underneath, the beast was lurking, and it wanted blood.

Her eyes were drawn to the guests of honour. The man with Lethe emanated menace. He was a dark, troubling presence. However many people surrounded him, there was always space around him, always a distance. Jo could see blackness at the heart of him, a deep pool of evil and corruption matched to a terrible vision and vast, twisted power.

The bell rang again and everyone returned to their seats. The chatter died down and there was an expectant hush. The beast was watching, with glittering eyes and shining fangs. The beast was waiting, with terrible hunger and pitiless cruelty.

Realisation finally dawned. 'It's to the death,' thought Jo and all she could remember was a Christmas day when her dad gave her a locket and her

mum gave her a tortoiseshell cat. She looked for a way out, but there was nowhere to run. There were guards with snarling dogs surrounding the arena. She emped Ali. What did it matter now if their messages were traced? She said the only thing that seemed worth saying. ***I love you both with all my heart.***

Back came the desperate reply. ***Jo. I love you. I'm in Camden. Where are you?***

The thought of her mother being so close was too much – hope and despair battled within her as the bell rang for the second round and she was pushed into the spotlight. She just screamed, not caring now who heard her. ***'Mum! I'm in The Roundhouse! Help me! Help me!'*** and then she was unable to speak as Lucy fell upon her, snarling and biting, clawing and scratching in a frenzy. The spectators were on their feet now, a crescendo of noise gradually becoming one word, said over and over again.

'Kill!'

'Kill!'

'Kill!'

'Kill!'

Whatever Darren had given her was making Jo clumsy and uncoordinated. She was no match for Lucy and she felt herself sinking to the ground under a barrage of kicks, bites and punches. Lucy punched her face repeatedly until she could hardly see for blood and tears. Her head was bowed in defeat, so she didn't see the guards closing in with their dogs, ready to slip their leashes, and she didn't see Mirabel signal to Lucy for one last dramatic gesture of humiliation.

Lucy took hold of the flimsy fabric of Jo's costume, and ripped it from neck to waist, exposing Jo's back.

There were gasps, then silence fell. In the ultraviolet light, the lines and whorls on Jo's body pulsed and glowed.

A single voice called out 'Freak!' then another voice joined in, and another; a chorus of jeers and catcalls punctuated by whoops of malicious glee. The dogs were closer now. Jo could hear their rasping breath, sense their thirst for blood.

'Hold your head high,' she told herself, and slowly, painfully, she rose to her feet. Her costume slipped to the ground, and her body blazed.

The death chant resumed and grew louder. The audience drummed their feet in an ancient, tribal war-cry, preparing for the sacrifice.

And then a woman's voice commanded the crowd.

'Be silent.'

A hush fell.

'This child is one of the Chosen,' continued the voice, melodic and compelling. Her footsteps came closer and her soft, smooth elegant hand took Jo's limp hand.

'You poor lamb,' murmured Lethe. 'Let's forget that any of this ever happened, shall we?'

And from the depths of her broken body and broken heart, with the drug clouding and fogging her mind, a frightened, lost little girl said, 'Yes.'

Chapter Eleven – Motherly Love

The view from the enormous picture window was stunning. All of London stretched out before the attractive young girl with the short copper coloured hair and green eyes. She was beautifully dressed in an expensive amber silk top and perfectly cut chocolate denim jeans. She looked thoughtful and perhaps a little wistful as she nibbled the luscious strawberries in the crystal bowl before her.

'Mama,' she said, coaxingly, 'please might we have a kitten?'

'Jocasta,' smiled the beautiful woman, stroking the girl's cheek, 'how I would love to say yes. But have you forgotten how ill you became when you were a little girl? I've never seen an allergic reaction to match it. I thought I was going to lose you.'

The girl looked puzzled. 'I don't remember,' she said.

'You and your memory! Still, you were very young and you have done so much studying lately it comes as no surprise if you forget some things. I'm afraid, though, that a kitten is out of the question.'

'You did say I had worked so hard on the screening programme that I could have a reward,' wheedled the girl. 'I would so love a kitten.'

'And I will keep my promise,' came the reply. A slight edge of irritation tinged the speaker's voice. 'But we are engaged in work of national importance, Jocasta, and our duty must come first. The child screening programme is a vital part of our Social Solutions policy. But you know that.'

'I'm sorry, Mama. Forgive me.' She changed the subject. 'Mama, you were going to tell me what happens to the children after they have been screened?'

'Oh, Jocasta!' She clapped her hands together, her eyes sparkling with excitement. 'We help them in so many ways! Thanks to your gift we can enable them to reach their full potential. We have special places, called Sunbeam Farms, where they get a fresh start and

receive expert training to help them overcome their problems. It is a wonderful facility.'

'Might I go and visit one day?' asked the girl.

'Alas, my precious, that cannot be. There are those who would harm you because you are my daughter. VergissMeinNicht has enemies who do not see what great work we do.'

'The Righteous,' stated the girl, a wisp of memory brushing her mind.

'The Rioters,' corrected the woman. Her voice was suddenly frosty. 'There is nothing righteous about those who oppose the rehabilitation of those poor unfortunate creatures deemed to be sub-standard. We have a duty to protect decent, law-abiding citizens from those who, through no fault of their own, are not fit to live in normal society.'

'But there are so many of them, Mama!'

'All the more reason to seek them out as soon as we possibly can. Thanks to your talent, Jocasta, we can discover the damage even before it manifests itself.'

The girl was thoughtful. 'How long do the children stay at the farms?'

'Until they have been successfully reprogrammed, and are fit to take their place in civilised society.'

'But what about their mothers and fathers? Don't they miss their children? And don't the children miss them?'

'You are such a tender-hearted child,' cooed Lethe Lacuna soothingly. 'Of course it can be painful. But we have techniques to help them cope with the distress and they soon forget they were ever unhappy. But enough questions, my dear. You must rest so you are at your best this evening. An important visitor will be here for supper, and I want him to see what a talented daughter I have.'

'Yes, Mama,' said Jo obediently, and she closed her eyes.



The old woman blinked and smiled at the anxious man sitting by her bedside. 'Hello, Reg,' she said. 'What are you doing here?'

'Oh, Em! You've had us so worried! We thought we were going to lose you!'

'Lose me? What are you on about?' Em looked around, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings. Her face was puzzled. 'What happened?'

'It was one of those Ferals,' answered Reg. 'Lucy. Took a shine to your place. Reckon you put up quite a fight, but she nearly did for you.'

Em could hardly take it all in. 'What's this place, Reg? And how did I get here?'

'That kid Zebo sent for me. You were out cold, so I brought you here. It's an old war-time shelter, under a warehouse in Stepney. There's a whole gang of us. You're safe now.'

'How long have I been here?'

'Six months,' he replied.

Em looked taken aback. 'I don't remember any fight,' she said. 'But there was a girl...' Something was troubling the old woman. She was supposed to do something, but what? Em searched her memory, then looked horror-struck. 'I was supposed to guard her while she was asleep! So The Vermin couldn't get her!' She concentrated hard.

'What are you doing?' asked Reg. 'You mustn't exert yourself, Em.'

'Just trying to emp her,' came the reply. 'But I can't reach her. It's like she's not there anymore. Something bad must have happened.' Em looked distressed.

'What was she like, this girl?' asked Reg. 'We'll keep an eye out for her.'

'But you know her!' remembered Em. 'You were trying to find her. Red-headed kid; green eyes.'

Reg looked away. 'Yes,' he replied awkwardly. 'I feel absolutely terrible, Em.' She took him in properly for the first time. It looked as if he had not slept or eaten for the whole six months. 'That poor kid,' continued Reg, racked with guilt. 'It's all my fault. I left her on her own in the tunnels. I went back for her as quickly as I could but she'd vanished. I let her down. Now the Vermin have got her.'

Em looked at him kindly. 'You can't blame yourself.'

Reg carried on morosely. 'It's been all over the news. Turns out she's Lethe Lacuna's long-lost daughter. Something about a special birthmark or some such rubbish.'

'I saw something on her arm,' said Em slowly. 'Can't imagine Lethe Lake as a mother, though.'

Reg was puzzled. 'Lake?' he said. 'You called her Lake.'

Now Em looked confused. 'I did? Must be going batty. I meant Lacuna.'

'Well, don't tire yourself out thinking about it all,' admonished Reg, pulling himself together. 'You need something to eat. Don't want you passing out. Some good grub and plenty of rest is what you need.'

'Seems like I've done nothing but rest for six months,' grumbled Em, but Reg could see she was grateful to sink back on her pillows and close her eyes.



Ali threw the official looking letter across the room. Tears of rage filled her eyes. Paul looked at her anxiously. 'Jo?' he said, uncertainly.

Ali's voice was hard and bitter. 'Lethe's lawyers say that if I persist in alleging she has stolen my daughter, I will be sued. They have conjured up some papers to prove that we fostered her on the clear understanding that Lethe would claim her back. That woman is wicked.'

'Wicked,' echoed Paul.

Ali wrung her hands. 'I was so close, Paul! I could feel Jo – Oh, God, she was so frightened! She was calling out to me – and then, suddenly, nothing. And the next thing, my power-crazed sister is parading Jo around like a pet lamb.' She struggled to stay calm. 'I think she has forgotten all about us, Paul. Lethe must have wiped her memory.'

Paul struggled to find the right words. 'Like me?' he asked finally, his face sad.

Yes, my love,' said Ali. 'Like you.' She stroked his hand tenderly. His face lit up and Ali realised, with a guilty start, that there had been precious little

tenderness in her since Lethe had come to take Jo away.

'Try not to worry, my darling,' she said, with a cheerfulness she did not feel.

Paul frowned. 'Not a child,' he said, with difficulty.

'She's only thirteen, Paul! And we missed her birthday!'

He shook his head in frustration. 'Me,' he said forcefully. 'Not a child.'

Ali was taken aback. She had put so much energy into staying strong, trying to stop herself from falling apart, that she had treated Paul like an overgrown infant. Now she looked at him properly for the first time in months, and saw the sorrow, dignity and strength in his face and was ashamed.

'Oh, Paul,' she whispered. 'I am so sorry.'

He wiped away her tears, then pointed first to Ali and then to the photograph of Jo.

'In my heart,' he said.

Jo woke with a start from a dream where a man she didn't recognise and a woman like Mama, but wearing shabby old clothes, called to her from the far bank of a raging river. Reflected in the river was the sullen face of a dark-haired boy she half-remembered. She turned round, but there was no-one there. When she looked back at the river, the reflection was gone. Spray from the river splashed her face, and when she woke, her eyes were wet.

Mama appeared at her bedroom door. Her perfectly made up mouth was smiling with delight as she crossed the room, carrying a large package wrapped in silver and gold paper, tied with a large green bow.

'I promised you a reward, Jocasta,' laughed Lethe, 'and here it is!'

Jo hastily dabbed at her eyes and reached out for the present. 'Thank you, Mama,' she said demurely, and she carefully untied the bow then pulled away the paper, revealing a peach velvet box encrusted with precious gems. She lifted the lid.

Inside, nestling on silver quilted satin was a sable black, long-haired kitten, with emerald eyes. Jo looked from the kitten to Lethe, not knowing what to say.

'It's beautiful,' she stammered at last.

'Exquisite,' agreed Lethe with delight, handing her a slim, elegant platinum cylinder. 'Press the top button,' she said excitedly.

Jo did so.

The kitten opened its mouth and mewed prettily.

'Try another one,' said Lethe.

The kitten turned a somersault. Another button produced a deep purring. Yet another button closed the emerald eyes.

'Thank you, Mama,' said Jo again, and she dutifully kissed Lethe on her soft, flawless cheek.

Lethe smiled. 'I know how much it means to you,' she said. Her tone became brisk. 'Now we need to get you ready. The amber two-piece, I think. It brings out the highlights in your hair. And the topaz pendant will be perfect.'

'My silver locket would look lovely,' said Jo. 'I haven't worn it for ages.'

Lethe looked puzzled. 'You don't have a silver locket, Jocasta.'

'Yes, I do,' came the prompt reply. 'There's a picture of you and...' She faltered as a fog filled her mind. She struggled to remember. 'It might be in my rucksack...'

'Do not argue with me, Jocasta,' said Lethe coldly. 'You have no locket and you most certainly do not have a rucksack.'

'I am sorry, Mama,' said Jo meekly.

'Indeed, I expect you downstairs in ten minutes,' said Lethe. 'You will look your best.'

She swept out.

Jo slowly picked up the mechanical kitten and pressed the button to start it purring. She buried her face in the soft, silky fur, and rocked silently backwards and forwards, her heart bleak and empty.

Chapter Twelve – RAINBOW

Jo made herself smile at the short, balding man facing her across the dining table. He had just praised her work on the Social Solutions child screening programme.

'Thank you, Mr. Stigmurus,' she said. She lowered her eyes, afraid he would see how deeply repulsive she found him. He made her flesh creep.

'It is an honour for Jocasta to meet you, Titus,' fluted Lethe. 'She is truly appreciative that you have given up your valuable time to speak with her.'

The powerful man laughed. There was no humour in his laughter. 'I doubt that very much,' he said. Jo realised with a jolt that he knew exactly what she thought of him, and he didn't care. 'So, young lady. Your little talent is proving quite useful to VergissMeinNicht. What do you think of our programme?'

Jo was riled by his words and his manner. She avoided looking at Lethe as she answered. 'It seems to me,' she said slowly, 'that some of the people who work for you are more damaged and more dangerous than the children I am screening.'

'Jocasta!' Lethe was furious. 'How dare you speak to our guest like that! Apologise at once.'

Mr. Stigmurus laughed. 'Oh, don't be ridiculous, Lethe. Jocasta can hardly be expected to appreciate the unusual talents of some of our work-force.' He smiled a wolf-like smile. 'The people who work for me are an especially chosen elite, and in time, Jocasta, you will be proud to join them. But in the meanwhile, you are going to have to work a great deal harder to justify your privileged place in this organisation.'

Jo was stung. 'I do work hard,' she protested.

'Not hard enough. Continuous improvement is the way to perfection,' he said.

'How pompous he is,' thought Jo mutinously, then gasped as a stab of pain ripped through her. She stared, open-mouthed, at the menacing figure facing

her. He smiled sardonically. Jo shielded automatically. He seemed amused.

Lethe appeared not to have noticed anything amiss. 'I know Jocasta will want to do her very best,' she said, an edge of tension in her words. 'Won't you, dear?' There was an almost imperceptible plea in her voice.

'She's afraid of him,' thought Jo, and immediately felt contrite. 'Of course, Mama,' she said.

Titus Stigmurus opened a large folder with the word RAINBOW written on the cover. 'The screening programme will be more efficient if you classify the units according to these headings,' he said.

Jo leafed through the folder. The headings described the different ways in which the children could have been damaged. Violence. Neglect. Humiliation. Molestation. Torture. Abandonment.

The list was long, and some of the headings had sub-headings.

'Why is it called RAINBOW?' asked Jo. She struggled to keep an even tone but she felt sick at heart.

'Research And Information Network Bringing Order Worldwide,' He laughed but the laughter did not reach his eyes. 'People like a good acronym. Stops them having to think too much. Inside the front cover is a key to the colour code for the severity of the damage.' He leaned back in his chair and looked directly at her. 'Well?'

'It's very thorough,' she granted. 'But how will it help the children?'

He sounded like an actor doing a voice-over for a commercial. 'More accurate processing will mean we can tailor the remedial treatment to the individual,' he said. 'The benefits will be enormous.'

Lethe was shining eyed with admiration. 'This is wonderful!' she said. 'Truly innovative. Jocasta will begin work straight away, won't you dear?'

'Yes, Mama,' said Jo obediently.

'There's a good girl,' said Titus Stigmurus. 'Now off you go. We have grown-up matters to discuss.'

With a wave of his hand Jo was dismissed.



'You alright, Em?' Reg handed her a cup of coffee. 'Only you've been staring into space for ages.'

'The trouble with getting old,' she said, looking exasperated, 'is it plays hell with your memory. I've got this feeling I'm missing something really important. Something to do with that girl.'

'That poor kid. I saved her from the Man in the Moon but they still got her in the end.'

Em looked puzzled and Reg told her how he had met Jo, Sebastian and Calico near the entrance to the tunnels.

'How did she know about the tunnels, anyway?'

'She came before, with her dad,' answered Reg. 'A birthday adventure, he called it.'

'So where is he now?' Em frowned. 'He never gets a mention.'

'Scarpered, if he had any sense,' said Reg. 'That Lacuna woman would have him for breakfast. If you ask me he had a lucky escape.' Reg poured some more coffee. 'He was alright. I liked him. What he don't know about the Underground ain't worth knowing.'

'Apart from an encyclopaedic knowledge of trains,' teased Em, gently, 'which clearly sets him apart from other mere mortals, what was he like?'

'Good bloke,' said Reg, noncommittally. 'Big grin.'

Em drummed her fingers expectantly.

'He was part American Indian,' said Reg, digging into his memory. 'Paul something. Some tribal name. Made me laugh... his folks came from Dakota, he said, and his name...'

'Is Lakota,' said Em slowly. 'Paul Lakota.'

'You know him?' asked Reg, surprised.

Em sighed. 'Reg,' she said, 'I know the name. But there is a great big fog in my mind, and Paul Lakota is lost in there somewhere, along with heaven knows what else.'

'Then we'd better go exploring,' said Reg with relish. 'I like a challenge.'



The latest update to the RAINBOW Social Solutions screening programme was being put through its paces.

Jo sat in front of a huge monitor, staring at the keyboard Titus Stigmurus had devised. There were seven buttons, one for each colour of the rainbow. All the other keys had symbols on them. She knew them off by heart now. A lightning flash for cruelty. An empty plate for starvation. A clenched fist for violence. A star for over indulgence. A pointing finger for humiliation, and so, unrelentingly, on.

'Let me demonstrate,' he said, gleefully, leaning in front of her. Jo flinched at the nearness of him. 'Which is the first school on your list?'

'St. Agatha's,' answered Jo.

'They'd better be ready for us,' grunted Titus. He punched a button. A list of all the schools in a thirty mile radius appeared and he selected St. Agatha's. The monitor lit up, and Jo saw a small, soulless cubicle, with an empty chair and a strange apparatus attached to the arm of the chair.

'Hurry up,' seethed Titus impatiently. As if she'd heard him, a worried looking young teacher appeared, leading a little blonde girl by the hand. The little girl was tearful. The teacher sat her down, and fastened the apparatus to her hand.

Jo studied the little girl.

'Anything?' demanded Titus.

Jo shook her head.

Titus pressed the OK button, and the apparatus unfastened. He pressed the NEXT button. The little girl's place was taken by a small, cheeky-faced, brown-haired boy. Jo looked at him carefully, and nodded her head.

'Indigo fist,' she said sadly, and Titus pressed both buttons.

There was a clicking from the apparatus, then a sudden thump. The boy let out a yell of pain, then his hand was released. The image of a fist the colour of a bruise was clearly visible on the back of his hand.

'Next,' said Titus Stigmurus.



'Tell me about Midge,' said Reg.

Em's eyes lit up. 'We met during the Blitz,' she said. 'He was a bit older than me. Very kind, and clever, too. And brave. I cried for a week when he went to war. And I wrote to him, and he sent me poems he'd written, and lovely sketches. I kept them all.'

'Can I see them?' asked Reg gently.

She shook her head. 'We got bombed, Reg. All gone.' A sudden thought crossed her mind. 'We're in Stepney, right?' Reg nodded. 'Did this place used to be called Mickey's Shelter, by any chance?' He nodded again.

'This is where we were when the house got hit! We usually went to the tube station, but the warning went and this was the nearest place. My mum and dad didn't like to bring me here. Before Mickey it had a terrible reputation.'

'Who was Mickey?' asked Reg.

'Well, Mickey was an optician. He was remarkable. I don't think I'll ever forget him, however bad my memory gets. He was three foot tall, hunchbacked and as big-hearted as you like. This place was dark, filthy and overcrowded. It was mob rule and downright dangerous, and he sorted it out. He got a shelter committee going and things improved a lot. Even so, there were some wild goings-on down here, or so the stories went.'

'Where did you go after the bombing?'

'We went to my Nan's. I was afraid Midge wouldn't be able to find me, but he did.' Em fell silent. She was silent for a long time.

'This isn't a happy-ever-after story, is it,' said Reg carefully.

Mary was thoughtful. 'War breaks some men, and makes others. It made him. He had become a man and I was still a child,' she said. 'He'd met someone else. So that was that. I got over it.' She looked weary; very old and very frail. She closed her eyes. 'I'm going to rest now,' she said, and the conversation was over.



Jo was tired of pressing buttons. She was tired of duty, obedience and compliance. She was particularly

tired of living in a cocoon, however luxurious. She longed to go out in the fresh air, on her own, without a protective entourage, and meet people of her own age. She wanted to walk in the woods, laugh in the rain, feel the sun on her face and run along golden sands then dive into the constant, mysterious sea. She was haunted by a fragment of memory – a line from a long forgotten song, something to do with dancing and waving by the sea under a diamond sky.

Over and over again she returned to the lyric, interpreting it in collages; charcoal sketches; pen and ink washes. She knew that at some level it displeased Mama. 'You are very talented, Jocasta,' Mama would say, but her lips tightened as she said the words and, unlike her other paintings, the pictures were never displayed.

Jo sighed. Mama tried so hard to please her, but often, as with the mechanical kitten, she missed the mark. Jo knew if she said to Mama that she wanted to go to the sea, then a designer swim-suit would be purchased, a picnic basket would be produced crammed with delicacies and then Sebastian would drive her to a picturesque fishing village and keep a watchful eye on her the whole time, ensuring that she did not speak with anyone. In any event his malevolent presence alone was enough to ensure that no-one came close to her.

Sebastian. He gave her the creeps. He was punctiliously civil to Jo, but resentment and surliness seethed just below the surface. He was a reluctant but conscientious nursemaid.

Ever since she had recklessly told Titus that she could see how damaged the people were who worked for him, she had noticed they were all wary around her, and their shields seemed strengthened. In some ways this was a relief – the shocking glimpses of depravity and wickedness had depressed her profoundly.

Sebastian was different, however. She was unable to read him, but he appeared fleetingly in her dreams, looming and menacing. She would run then, in her nightmare, and her heart would pound and there would

be ringing in her ears and the taste of blood in her mouth until she woke up, soaked with sweat, sickened by the lingering smell of stale cigarette smoke.

Jo came to a decision. If being with Sebastian was the price of a modicum of freedom, then she would pay it.

Plans were made for a trip to the coast. 'Mama will probably buy me a diamond encrusted bucket and spade,' thought Jo, feeling amused and disloyal simultaneously, but in the event Lethe was too distracted to make much of a splash.

'A small group of Rioters attacked some of our enforcement officers,' she told Jo. 'Don't worry – they won't spoil your day out. They have been rounded up and I have to go to a meeting to decide the best corrective measures.' She kissed Jo on the cheek. 'Have a lovely day with Sebastian,' she said. 'I so wish I could come with you.'

'I doubt that,' thought Jo wryly to herself. She suspected that Lethe found mothering and domesticity rather a chore. Together they walked to the car.

Sebastian was waiting for them. He looked even more ghastly than normal. 'Heavens,' said Lethe. 'Are you ill, Sebastian?'

'One of my headaches,' he said gloomily.

'Are you well enough to drive?' said Lethe, concerned, though it was hard to tell if she was worried about Sebastian or the possible cancellation of her plans.

'I'll be fine. I've taken some tablets. And the sea air will do me good,' he replied.

Lethe waved them off just as a sleek red sports car drew up. Titus Stigmurus opened the passenger door and they drove off together.

The journey was mainly silent. Sebastian was not in a conversational mood. They were pulling up in the pretty little quayside car park when Jo said politely, 'How's the headache?'

'Terrible,' said Sebastian, his face the colour of putty.

'Why don't you stay here and rest?' said Jo artfully. 'I'll be fine on my own for a while.'

Sebastian shook his head. 'Your Mama would kill me if anything happened to you,' he grunted. His face contorted as the pain seized him. He held his head in both hands and closed his eyes.

As Jo studied his agonised face a voice echoed in her memory. An old woman, cackling unkindly, saying, 'That'll keep him busy for a while. A bad migraine can last a very long time.'

'She did it to him,' thought Jo. 'Whoever she was, she did it to him.' And hot on the heels of that thought, came another. 'I wonder if I can do it.'

Jo concentrated very hard, picturing a tight metal band round Sebastian's head; a band with rivets and screws and bolts. She tightened the bolts and watched, fascinated, repulsed and horrified, as, oblivious to her, he cried out and rocked in agony, his worsening cries corresponding to each turn of the screw.

Jo watched with clinical detachment as she made him pass out.

'I have power,' she thought. 'I can cause pain.' It felt good and bad in almost equal measures.

She briefly thought about getting out of the car and running along the beach, free as a bird, but something cunning and cautious prevailed.

Jo sat, outwardly demure, as she waited for Sebastian to recover, and considered the potential of this new-found talent.



'Did you ever get married, Em?'

She shook her head. 'Never met anyone to compare with Midge,' she said. 'Though I did my share of looking.' She laughed raucously, then looked serious again. 'He was one in a million.'

'And you never saw him again,' mused Reg.

Em looked at him sharply. 'Did I say that?'

'You met up again?' asked Reg, still hoping for his happy ending.

'Can't remember,' she replied, her face sly and secretive.

'Can't, or won't?' he said, exasperated.

'You're tiring me out, Reg,' complained Em. 'I'm just a poor forgetful old woman.'

'You're a cantankerous, tough old biddy,' countered Reg. 'I'm certain that somewhere in that fog there's all sorts of useful stuff. That Lacuna woman. The girl and her father. You have to try, Em. The Righteous need all the help they can get to bring down The Vermin.'

'What happened to the group they caught?'

'There was a show trial,' he said, his face grim. 'Most of them were sent for re-training, predictably enough.' He paused, struggling to gather his thoughts. 'They executed the ringleader as an example to the rest of us. They think they can destroy us, one by one. She said as much, after the trial.'

'Lacuna?' asked Em.

He nodded. 'She stood in front of the television cameras, all gloating and triumphant and said, 'One day these people will be nothing more than a vague memory.' He broke off as Em cried out in distress. 'Em, love, whatever's the matter?'

Tears sprang to Em's eyes. 'She said it to me,' she whispered. 'She said it to me. *You will be nothing more than a vague memory. No one will remember you.*'

'When was this, Em?' asked Reg, his face fierce.

'I can't remember,' said Em, and this time there was nothing sly or secretive about her face.

Reg came to a decision. 'We're going to have to bump-start your memory, Em. And I think I know how.'

She looked at him expectantly and with some anxiety.

'How many Paul Lakotas can there be,' he asked rhetorically. 'We're going to track him down, and then we'll see what's what.'

Chapter Thirteen – Smokey

Jo stretched as she sat in front of the screen. An anxious little face appeared in front of her, and she thought deeply. 'Red star,' she thought, punching the buttons. 'Hardly even red, really. More like pale pink.'

'What do you think you're doing?' A voice Jo had never heard interrupted her thoughts. The voice was sad, yet furious, and just behind her. She wheeled round.

A pale, thin boy of her own age stared defiantly back at her. He was dressed in grey jeans and a matching jacket, almost the colour of the afternoon shadows on the sunlit walls.

The sun dazzled Jo and she thought her eyes were playing tricks on her as the boy seemed to come and go. The more she tried to focus, the harder it was to see him.

'Is this a dream?' she thought, then said, 'Who are you?'

'Call me Smokey,' said the boy. 'Now answer my question.'

'I'm testing children at risk,' said Jo. 'So they can get help.'

The boy laughed derisively. 'Is that what they've told you?' he asked. 'We call it screening the subs, where I come from.'

'Subs?' queried Jo.

'When Stigmurus says it, he means sub-standard or sub-human. People who don't fit his vision of a perfect society. When we say it, we mean subterraneans, because anyone who doesn't conform is being forced underground. Most of us outsiders live in tunnels and basements now. The sewers are filling up nicely, I hear. Bit of a contrast to this place. You wouldn't like it underground.'

As he spoke an image flooded Jo's mind. She was creeping through a tunnel, dark and damp. Ahead of her a silver train glimmered like a ghost.

Smokey laughed. 'There's hundreds of Righteous people living in that train now,' he said.

'You read my mind!' Jo was outraged and mystified. He shrugged. 'You emped me,' he said.

'I what?'

'It's no big deal,' he said, mystified in his turn. I can emp; you can emp; we just connected. That's all.'

'Emp?' Jo was completely baffled.

'You must know about emping,' he said. She shook her head. 'Well, some people are empaths, and you're definitely one. It takes one to know one, I suppose. But I've never heard of anyone forgetting they could emp.'

'He's mad,' thought Jo. 'Maybe I should call Sebastian.'

Don't even think of it. His voice spoke directly to her mind. ***And I am not mad, as it happens.***

Jo's face was wary and suspicious.

'It's hereditary,' he said out loud. 'Try calling your mother. But not now. I haven't got much time and you need to wise up fast.'

'How did you get in here?' asked Jo, thinking of all the security that surrounded the place.

'Easy,' he replied. 'Nobody ever notices me.'

'You're invisible?' asked Jo, incredulous.

'Hardly,' he said. 'You can see me, after all.'

'Only if I concentrate,' she answered truthfully. 'You seem to keep slipping away.'

'Gets me into all sorts of places,' he said. 'Like the factory where they turn out those monstrosities.' He pointed to the empty chair and the odd apparatus on the screen. 'It wasn't particularly difficult to track the signal from the schools to you. So here I am. And I'm telling you that what you are doing is wicked beyond belief.'

'I don't believe you,' whispered Jo, but all the little doubts that had troubled her about the programme were thrown into sharp relief by Smokey's words.

'Get yourself to one of the farms,' he said. 'I'll show you what really goes on.'

He was leaving. Jo didn't want him to go.

'I have to go,' he said, fairly gently.

'We haven't got a plan,' she said, discomfited at being read so easily.

'As soon as you know the where and the when,' he answered, 'you can emp me.'

And he was gone.



A man in a donkey jacket and workman's overalls, with an old woman standing frail but straight next to him, knocked on the door of a pleasant house in a small village.

A pretty woman opened the door cautiously.

The man was taken aback. 'It's her!' he hissed. 'That Lacuna woman!'

The old woman shook her head. She was smiling broadly 'No. it's not,' she said. 'I remember now. She had a twin. May we come in?' she asked. 'We've never met. My name is Mary Montgomery.'



Jo smiled winningly at Lethe. 'Dearest Mama,' she said, 'I would so like to visit one of the farms.' She waited for the objection she knew would come.

'Why ever do you want to do that?' enquired Lethe. 'Surely you have everything you want here.'

'No, Mama,' said Jo, and to her surprise tears appeared in her eyes. 'I am so lonely. I never see anyone of my own age.'

Lethe patted her hand. 'Don't cry, dearest,' she said anxiously. 'I had not realised you felt alone.'

'It's not only that,' said Jo hesitantly. 'I want to see the farms. I send all these children away without knowing anything about what happens to them. I would so love to find out.'

Lethe looked troubled. 'Let me think about it,' she said. 'I am so busy at the moment...'

'Don't worry, Mama,' said Jo. 'I'll be perfectly safe with Sebastian.'



Ali Lakota opened her front door and grinned broadly.

'I came as fast as I could,' said Matthew anxiously. 'Have you found Jo?'

The grin faded momentarily as Ali shook her head. 'No,' she said, 'but I do have a wonderful surprise for you.'

She led her old friend and teacher into a sun-filled room. 'Sit down,' she said, 'and I'll be straight back. And no emping!'

Matthew leaned back in the comfortable armchair and closed his eyes. He was tired from the journey, and the sun was so warm. Calico jumped on his lap, and purred contentedly, then fell asleep.

Matthew dreamed. There was a young girl with dove-grey eyes. Her kisses were soft as falling apple blossom and her tears sparkled like spring rain. Then a tall, proud woman was laughing and crying and saying his name over and over again.

'Oh, Midge,' she said. 'My dearest Midge.'

'Am I dreaming?' he asked in wonderment, caught between dream and waking. 'Is it really you, Mary?'

She stroked his old, lined face with tender hands, smiling through her tears.

'My darling,' she whispered. 'Please forgive me.'

Ali, Paul and Reg tiptoed away as Matthew folded her in his arms.

We're nearly there. Jo emped Smokey. It still felt strange to Jo to communicate this way.

Good. You know what to do, came the reply.

Jo knew what to do. She had to do the tour of the farm, then, in the library, she had to give Sebastian the slip and meet Smokey. She took no pleasure in the thought of the pain she would need to cause Sebastian. She looked sideways at him. He was concentrating on driving. The purring car ate up the miles. They travelled in silence.

'Would you like some music?'

The abrupt question made Jo jump. 'Yes, please,' she replied.

'This is my favourite,' said Sebastian, as he pressed some buttons and the car was filled with sublime, soaring melody.

'It's beautiful,' said Jo, surprised.

'It's Faure's *Requiem*,' he said. 'I find it soothes me after one of my headaches.'

Jo felt wretched.

Sebastian was positively chatty. 'I've been looking forward to this visit,' he said. 'A friend of mine works at the farm.'

Jo would not have believed it possible for Sebastian to blush, but he did. She was suddenly easily able to read him and she saw a thin, austere girl standing by the door of a stable.

'She's called Janine. We both like horses,' he said, giving Jo the disconcerting feeling, that he was reading her mind. 'I wanted to be a jockey, once.' His voice was wistful.

Before long they turned off the road, and followed a long winding drive through an avenue of lime trees. As they turned a corner Jo looked down at a beautiful wooded valley, with a stream and mellow farm buildings nestling in the hollow.

'It's idyllic,' she said.

Sebastian nodded.

When the car stopped they were surrounded by happy laughing children and their carers, a staff of cheerful, calm and kind adults. As Jo scanned the children she saw the trouble beneath the smiles, but she was overwhelmed by a sense of warmth and safety, and she laughed, too, relieved that her fears seemed groundless.

The children showed her the animals and birds – ponies, calves and lambs; ducks, hens and geese. She was intrigued to see Janine, shy and awkward at the sight of Sebastian, who kept close to Jo throughout the tour. She met the house parents, the cheery cooks, the gardeners, the wise counsellors, the psychiatrists, psychologists and physiotherapists; the whole team of dedicated professionals who clearly had the children's best interests at heart. The children eagerly showed her their school rooms, the play room, sports facilities and art studio. Their bedrooms were charming, decorated according to the taste of each child.

Try as she might, Jo could find no dark shadows or whisper of cruelty. She felt resentful when, after a delicious lunch, Smokey emped her. **Nearly time.**

The head house mother was smiling at her apologetically. 'We all have a siesta after lunch,' she declared. 'Perhaps you would like to stroll in the garden?'

Jo would have liked to do exactly that, but Smokey's plan lay heavy on her mind. 'I'd love to spend some time in the Library,' she said. 'Is that alright, Sebastian?' He agreed, but looked unenthusiastic.

Together they made their way to the Library. Jo was steeling herself to knock him out, when he suddenly spoke. His tone was pleading. 'I was wondering,' he said hesitantly, 'if you would mind if I went to give Janine a hand with the horses for ten minutes...'

Jo could have hugged him, but instead she gazed at him solemnly. 'Mama would have a fit,' she admonished him, then added hastily, anxious to not overplay her hand, 'but you deserve a rest. You watch over me so well.' She giggled a little, a co-conspirator. 'Just this once then! Off you go!'

She watched him walk away, then became aware that she was being watched in her turn. Smokey stood by one of the bookshelves. He nodded tersely. 'Good riddance to him,' he said. 'Come on.'

He moved a set of books bound in green leather and pulled a lever. A whole shelf moved, revealing a passage and flight of stone steps. Jo followed him reluctantly.

'You've swallowed it hook, line and sinker,' he said scornfully. 'You're very easily conned.'

She ignored him.

'Suit yourself. You'll see.'

At the bottom of the steps was a heavily fortified door with a keypad. Smokey pressed some numbers and the door opened. On the other side was a complex of rooms that mirrored the ones Jo had seen before lunch. The colour scheme of blues, mauves and purples was cool and restful. Jo noticed that each door had a

sign bearing one of the symbols from the RAINBOW programme.

'We can speak openly,' said Smokey. 'All the builders are gone. They are bringing in the specialist equipment next week and after that, the children. The children you have selected. Specifically, the blue, indigo and violet groups.'

'It seems to me they couldn't come to a better place,' said Jo, feeling defensive.

'That's what Titus Stigmurus says,' answered Smokey. 'But he has a rather different take on it. I wanted you to see this place,' he said, but most of all I want you to see this.' He opened a door marked *Training Resources*.

Smokey went to a cupboard and took out a video, put it into the player and pressed Play. 'This is him, speaking to the specially chosen bastards who will work here.'

Jo watched as Titus appeared on the screen. He was standing roughly where Jo and Smokey were standing, in front of a door with a purple lightning flash. A projector and screen were clearly visible.

'You have been chosen for this top-secret mission, codenamed *Scorpion Grass*, for your exceptional skills,' he said. 'I won't mince my words. Every well run society needs its undercover operatives. Assassins, spies, persuaders and thieves all take care of business while the world dreams on. You will be training the agents of the future, all specially chosen for their pre-disposition for this kind of work. The programme is set to expand beyond my wildest dreams. And my dreams are, as you will realise, wilder than most. The prototype training centre has been most instructive.'

Jo watched, feeling sick, as Titus projected a film onto the screen. A slightly younger Titus stared out at them, his running commentary excited and jubilant. He stood on a rough pebble beach, the sea behind him, pointing at a complex of single storey buildings. In the far distance it was just possible to see the outline of a lighthouse. 'Welcome to CUT,' he beamed.



There had been laughter and tears in abundance. Now a feeling of deep peace crept over the two old people, sitting in the afternoon sun. Matthew had one more question, though.

'Why did you go away?' he asked. 'I tried so hard to find you.'

Mary was silent for a long time. Then she said slowly and painfully, 'She broke me, Midge, and I could not bear for you to see me broken. I was not in my right mind, and I could not trust my memory, but I never lost my sense of dignity and pride.'

'You were always proud,' he observed. 'After the war, when I broke your heart, you pretended not to care. So I pretended to believe you.'

'It was for the best,' said Mary gently. 'Your life would have been incomplete without Rosie and the boys.'

Matthew wept. 'And when they were taken from me,' he said, 'you sought me out and put me back together again. Why wouldn't you let me do the same when you were shattered?'

Mary thought for a while. 'What happened to your family was a terrible accident,' she said at last. 'No-one was to blame. But Lethe was my star pupil, and she turned everything I ever taught her – everything you ever taught me – against me. I could not face you when I was defeated and ashamed.'

'How did she do it?' he asked. 'I can't believe you, of all people, asked her to make you forget.'

'No,' said Mary. 'I thought I was immune. But she found a way.' She changed the subject. 'What of Alithea? Surely between you there is a way to bring Jo home.'

Now Matthew was silent. 'Right now she can see that Jo is safe,' he said eventually. 'It's the wisdom of Solomon. Two mothers lay claim to the same child. Solomon says that the baby can be cut in half and they can have an equal share. The true mother would rather the other woman has the child alive than have him killed. In the story Solomon then gives the true mother

the baby. Ali is afraid of harming Jo. In a tug-of war with Lethe, Jo would be the rope.'

'Indeed. But in the absence of Solomon, Ali has to take on Lethe and win,' said Mary bluntly.

'She sees it as an unbearable choice – destroy her daughter or destroy her sister. She keeps hoping for another way.'

Mary sighed. 'Ah. The fear of causing pain and the hope for a perfect solution. A recipe for paralysis.'

'You never were one for patience and the long game,' observed Matthew.

Mary raised an eyebrow and gave him a look.

He had the grace to blush.



The film was sickening. Titus opened doors to rooms in Hell – rooms where assassins and torturers were trained. As he opened another door, he announced, 'At the Centre for Utilisation and Training we know that sex and seduction are great weapons. Our tutor here is especially gifted.'

Jo could not take her eyes off the screen. Exquisitely beautiful boys and girls caressed and stroked each other as soft music played and erotic images glowed on the walls. Jo remembered Lucy and Zebo. Then she had needed to run – now she was transfixed, an unfamiliar heat rising within her. She could not look at Smokey.

A young girl, a little older than Jo, with a face of heart-stopping loveliness, moved gracefully around the room, whispering instructions as she went. At one point she smiled directly at the camera. Jo saw that her beautiful almond-shaped eyes were cold and lifeless; totally devoid of expression. The spell was broken. Jo looked away, ashamed and embarrassed.

Smokey was watching her. 'My sister, Bridget,' he said impassively, indicating the smiling girl. 'She was always ... different. Stigmurus and Lacuna discovered her and took her. My mother was devastated. That woman asked her if she wanted some help to forget the pain, and my mother said yes.' His voice was cold and bitter. 'Your precious Mama wiped my mum's

memory of my sister clean away. Not only that,' he said, faltering for the first time,' but she forgot about me as well.' He struggled for control. 'Oh, she smiles at me in a vague, kindly way, but she has no idea who I am.'

Jo felt helpless. 'I'm sorry,' she said, touching his hand.

He snatched his hand away, 'Don't,' he snapped. 'Just don't.'

On the screen Titus was showing the viewers the laboratory where the medical experiments were carried out. 'Here's where we reprogram the subjects.' Sad-eyed children were caged, attached to electrodes and tubes. Jo particularly noticed a Chinese girl, rattling the bars of her cage. Unlike the other children her dark eyes were wild and defiant. An attendant pressed a switch at the command of a woman in a white overall and the girl stiffened, convulsed, then collapsed as an electric shock coursed through her. The woman in the white overall checked a clipboard as she coldly examined the girl. Jo gasped. The woman was Mama.

'I think you've been wiped as well,' said Smokey abruptly. 'You look puzzled and lost sometimes, just like my mother. And you forgot how to emp. How did that happen?'

'I don't know,' said Jo helplessly. Her face was haunted. 'Smokey, I can't take much more of this.'

'This is the last room,' said Smokey.

She looked at the screen, and saw a door open on a room filled with the most pathetic, damaged, deformed and tragic scraps of humanity she had ever seen. Titus laughed. 'Got to give the assassins something to practice on,' he said, and then he closed the door.

The film stopped. Jo could find no words to say. She was reeling from the shock of what she had seen and the implications of Smokey's earlier suggestion.

Smokey spoke urgently, as they hurried back to the library. 'There are two things to do,' he said. 'First, destroy the RAINBOW machine, and secondly, find out where that hell-hole is.'

Jo nodded as Smokey operated the control and the shelves moved. They had only been gone for ten minutes, but that ten minutes had changed everything. The peacefulness of the library, the lovely view of the garden, the warm spring sunshine had all dazzled and delighted Jo's senses, but now the flickering images of evil and corruption filled her mouth with ashes and her heart with darkness. And overwhelming her mind, one horrifying question repeated over and over. 'What has she done to me?'

Chapter Fourteen – Titus Stigmurus

'Tell us about The Righteous,' said Ali to Reg. 'Who is their leader?'

Reg was thrown by the question. Mary stepped into the silence.

'Anyone who ain't Vermin can be Righteous,' she said, with more than a nod to Crazy Em. 'But as for a leader... Reg is the nearest, I reckon. Whatever he might think on the subject. But it's like herding cats. You've got all sorts – the street-kids, or Ferals, the trade unionists; the Quakers, feminists, humanists, non-conformists, artists, musicians, minorities – the usual crew. Plus the group that doesn't belong to groups. Apart from the fact they can't stand Lethal Ache and her band of thugs, they don't have a damn thing in common.'

'So no grand plan, then,' said Ali sadly.

'What would you like to see?' Mary was heated. 'The storming of Buckingham Palace or Wormwood Scrubs? Bands of bloodthirsty citizens knitting round a home-made guillotine in Trafalgar Square until in the end you can't tell which side is worst because they're all crazy for revenge and power? We opposed them within the law; we tried to out-vote them; we wrecked their systems and organisations wherever we could and still people flocked to them.'

'Why? What have they got to offer?' Ali was anguished. 'What is it that people want so badly?'

'The illusion of order and safety. The possibility of wealth and power. The promise of protection.' Matthew sounded weary. 'Regular work and a steady income. Trains that run on time.'

'And in exchange they turn a blind eye and don't ask awkward questions.' Mary was matter-of-fact.

'You want a peaceful revolution, Ali,' said Matthew. 'But like Bonaparte said, *Revolution is an idea which has found its bayonets.*'

'There has to be something between an eye for an eye and turning the other cheek,' said Ali. Her face was fierce. 'They can't be allowed to win.'

'Then they must be defeated,' said Mary Montgomery. 'And we have to do it.'



Jo sat at one of the library tables, her head in her hands, trying to think. She was conscious of Smokey, watching her from the shadows, and then she was aware of a commotion outside. The door burst open, and Sebastian was pushed into the library, followed by a furious Titus Stigmurus.

'You are under strict instructions never to let her out of your sight,' he snarled at Sebastian, slapping him round the head. Sebastian cringed with pain.

Jo couldn't bear it. 'Leave him alone,' she commanded. 'It's my fault. I felt sick and faint, and I asked Sebastian to go for help.'

Sebastian looked pathetically grateful. 'They're all having a siesta,' he improvised. 'I couldn't find anyone.'

The wind was taken out of Titus' sails but he continued to harangue Sebastian in a half-hearted way. As he did so, Jo noticed, to her horror, that the green books concealing the lever to open the secret passage were not completely returned to their correct position. She emped Smokey, then watched in fascination as he slipped, unnoticed, past Titus and put the books back in place. 'Like a ghost,' she thought, then remembered his mother, and shivered.

Titus noticed. 'You look awful,' he said. 'Time we were off.' He turned to Sebastian. 'Take the limo, and Jocasta can come with me in the sports car. I'll put the roof down. The fresh air will do her good.'

They said their goodbyes and set off. Titus was in an expansive, chatty mood and didn't seem to notice or mind that Jo was little more than monosyllabic. The journey passed quickly enough. However, as they approached Swiss Cottage it was clear the road ahead was blocked by marchers carrying placards with slogans such as

ERADICATE VERMIN

STIGMURUS = PURE POISON

LETHAL LETHE

TRUST THE RIGHTEOUS

A man with a donkey jacket was addressing the crowd through a megaphone. Jo felt puzzled. His face and voice seemed familiar. Titus raised the roof of the sports car quickly and took several side roads before turning into a narrow, private mews.

'We can walk from here,' he said. 'There's someone I want you to meet.'

He set off at a brisk pace, and a reluctant Jo struggled to keep up. After a while they were walking along a canal. The feeling of familiarity grew in Jo. 'I know this place,' she said.

'Camden Lock,' replied Titus. 'I expect you've been here with Lethe when you were little.'

Jo shook her head. 'No. That's not it.' She tried picturing Lethe here, among the busy, noisy crowds, and failed completely. They passed a boarded-up shop called *Quinn's*, and Jo's mind was full of muddled pictures – a man like a circus ringmaster, an orange feather, the name *Angelina* and fragments of songs.

Tatters of memory returned. Something was happening by the canal. A crowd was gathering. A spidery-black figure with a moon-like face was heading towards her. Sebastian. People were pulling her friend's body out of the water. Her friend whose name was Quinn.

'I need to rest,' she gasped to Titus, trying to make sense of what was happening.

'Not long now,' he said, and turned off the pavement and climbed down an old metal ladder to the towpath below. 'We've had to take the long way round,' he explained, 'because of that rabble of Rioters. I hate being late for an appointment.'

They turned into a tunnel.

'I feel sick,' she said, falling to her knees as the horror of the farm visit, fear of Titus and memories of Quinn overwhelmed her.

'Better get on with it then,' said Titus impatiently.

Dried leaves had blown into the tunnel entrance and Jo picked up handfuls of them to cover her vomit. As she did so, her fingers closed on something hard and cool, something that belonged with her. A little silver heart sang out to her from the dust and darkness, calling to her through the mist and confusion swirling in her mind. She slipped the locket in her pocket.

Titus helped her up and gripped her arm tightly. 'Come on,' he said, not unkindly.

More than anything Jo wanted to organise her thoughts – fragments of recollection slipped in and out of her mind but there was no sequence, no sense.

As they walked, Titus told her what was on his mind. He went straight to the point.

'As you know, Jocasta, I am very fond of your mother. I fully intend to marry her. I wish to be a father for you and guide you in the wise use of your special abilities.'

Jo was almost speechless. 'But I have a father,' she stammered. She saw a dark haired man with a friendly smile. Then the image was gone. Her head pounded.

Titus laughed. 'Technically, yes. But as you well know, it causes your dear Mama great pain to even mention him.'

Jo struggled to stay in the moment. 'She never speaks of him to me,' she said sadly.

Titus shrugged. 'He abandoned her before you were born. He never laid eyes on you. A thoroughly bad lot. I, however, have no intention of deserting the two of you.'

They walked in silence for a time. Jo could make no sense of the conflicting pictures in her head. If her father never knew her, then who had taught her to play cards? Who carried her when she hurt her ankle at the beach? There were so many questions and then the fog and pain swirled into her mind and she felt lost and afraid. However, whatever else had been forgotten she could not forget the things she had seen at the farm, and she was under no illusion about the man who so calmly told her he intended to be her father. Titus Stigmurus was wicked beyond words.



Ali was sitting on Jo's bed, gathering her thoughts. She wanted some time away from the others. The work on restoring Paul's memory was exhausting, even with Mary and Matthew's help. The more he understood, the angrier he became, and he was all for direct action and snatching Jo back. Ali argued passionately against anything hasty. She knew everyone was impatient with her but she kept wondering what exactly it was they expected her to do.

So she could restore memory. Big deal. She remembered Matthew's words. "What is real and true will be revealed to you. Your gift will be to enable remembrance in those who have forgotten their truth." What good was that against a sister who, in any battle, would rather destroy the prize than see someone else win it?



Jo recognised the heavy, reinforced door. She recognised the pantomime dame in her domain of silk, satin and velvet. She recognised the sulky girl being fitted for a costume. They were all pieces of a jigsaw, but Jo had no idea of the whole picture and the memories were disjointed.

Jo soon realised that all concerned were intent on pretending to her that they had never met. Even as her head swam with confusion she realised that she must not reveal that she remembered this place. So she played along with the pretence.

'My dear Mr. Stigmurus! What a pleasure to welcome you!' Madame Mirabel was charm itself. 'And who is this delightful young lady? Let me guess – that hair! Those eyes! What a lucky girl to have such a beautiful and talented mother!' She turned to the sullen bleach-blonde girl in the golden silk Chinese robe embroidered with little lion-dogs. 'Say hello to Miss Jocasta, Lucinda dearie.'

Lucy barely nodded. Jo's response was equally frosty. 'She hates me,' thought Jo. 'And I hate her. But why?'

'How's that grandson of yours?' asked Titus. A cloud passed over the old lady's face.

'Me and our Darren have had a little falling out,' she said slowly. 'Turned out he could talk alright after all. Turned out he reckoned I drove his mother to do what she did. As if I would harm my own flesh and blood! But he wouldn't listen when I told him I did what I did for her own good. He robbed me when I was sleeping and he took off. Got in with the wrong crowd.' A single tear formed in the corner of her beady little eye. 'Still, I mustn't be too hard on the little bleeder. It was him what found poor little Lucy here, thrown out on the streets with nowhere to go. She's been a proper comfort to me, has Lucy.' She dabbed her eyes and changed the subject. 'Anyway. To business. You wants a little reading, if I'm not mistaken, sir.'

'That's right,' said Titus. He turned to Jo. 'Madame Mirabel here has a little gift. She can wrinkle out someone's weakness in a jiffy. And I have a little gift, as it happens.' He paused for effect. 'I like to think of myself as The Enhancer. On my own, I can't do much – a little emping, perhaps, a bit of deep reading; the odd jab of pain. But in conjunction with someone else... well. That's a different story. I can modify their talent. It becomes something quite different. On her own, Mirabel has a particular gift. With me, she has something else.'

Mirabel took up the story. 'Oooh, we do make a good double act, if I says it myself. We can have a nice little rummage around together and we'll discover all sorts of interesting things – first what makes you weak then what makes you strong. Your special powers and the like.'

'And when I know all your powers, Jocasta, I will be able to see what happens when I enhance them.' Titus looked at her as if she were an interesting specimen under a microscope. He turned to Madame Mirabel. 'Do your thing first. It will help prepare her.'

He held Jo firmly as Mirabel came closer. 'Oooh, there's a nasty old snake in there,' she said, and Jo struggled to resist as the old fear gripped her and

squeezed the breath out of her. She was weak with nausea, confusion and horror. Her efforts to keep the old woman at bay were pitiful. The rouged and powdered face was inches away from Jo, and the merciless, little piggy eyes searched her soul. Waves of pain washed over her, leaving her as weak as a kitten. She was dizzy, slipping into darkness.

'Help me,' she implored Lucy. Lucy just laughed.

'Well now. That's odd,' said Madame Mirabel. Her voice was puzzled. 'Seems to be some kind of hole in there... Never come across that before.'

'Go deeper,' said Titus.

As the wicked old woman peeled away the delicate layers of protection Jo looked into an abyss of loneliness and loss. She ached with longing. She had once belonged, and now she was torn away, cast adrift into nothingness, with no comfort or companion. She howled to a cold moon in the empty, pitiless sky.

'Well, well, well. She had a twin,' said Mirabel triumphantly. 'Must run in the family... ouch!' She glared as Titus kicked her.

Jo was too desolate to notice Mirabel's slip-up. 'I had a twin,' she thought, and she grieved.

'It's them Blaschko lines!' said Mirabel, excited. 'When I saw them, I mean when I heard about them, I got our Darren to look it all up for me. Sometimes it's to do with twins. You gets this thing where twins is conceived, but one of the embryos don't make it. The one what survives absorbs the one what don't, and you gets a chimera.'

'A chimera,' said Titus slowly. His tone was thoughtful. 'Well, well. This young lady is full of surprises. And we still haven't done our party piece.' He looked dispassionately at Jo, who was curled up like a baby, crying and rocking in her distress. 'Now would be a good time, I think.' And he joined hands with Madame Mirabel. She set to work at once.

'Oooh,' said the old harridan, impressed, 'she's got a lot of talent. She can emp, she can truth-tell, she can deep-read and she can heal. And oh, my goodness, she can love like there's no tomorrow. But she's all over

the place at the moment – her memory's shot to blazes and she's all shook up with shock and she's got all these gifts but she don't know what to do with them. She needs taking in hand, Mr. Titus.'

'Indeed,' said Titus. He pulled Jo to her feet. 'Hold her still,' he commanded Mirabel. He grabbed Lucy. 'Jocasta,' he said. 'I know you can see the damage. Now it turns out you can heal. So mend Lucinda.'

The two girls faced each other. Lucy glowered at her. 'This has happened before,' thought Jo, and she tried to remember.

'I said *mend her*,' commanded Titus.

'I don't know how,' gasped Jo, but even as she denied it, even as she stared into the squirming, seething humiliation, hate and pain at the heart of Lucy, she saw a tiny pin-prick of light flickering in the shadows.

Jo concentrated and the speck of light became a dancing flame, with rainbow colours flashing like stars in a diamond sky as the flame moved and multiplied into a thousand petals.

A lotus of pure white light shone in front of Lucy. Wonder softened her face and she cupped her hands around the glowing, pulsing flower. At its centre a silver heart gleamed.

There was silence in the room as everyone stared at the transformation in front of their eyes. Lucy smiled.

'Very good,' said Titus. 'What will happen now, I wonder?' And he reached across and seized Jo by the wrist.

She watched in horror as one by one the petals blackened and curled, turning to a black dusty shadow which swirled round Lucy and invaded her eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth.

The wonder left Lucy's face and something terrible stared back at them from behind her eyes. There was a moment when time seemed to stand still, then she dropped to all fours, and snarling, leapt at Titus' throat.

He was prepared. He shot Lucy at point blank rage and she crumpled and fell at his feet. He kicked her body away. 'Only thing to do with a mad dog.' He

turned to Madame Mirabel, whose face was frozen – her mouth wide open in shock. 'Most instructive,' he said, and he threw some coins on the table.

'That won't cover the cost of the costume,' said Mirabel, recovering quickly. 'This Chinese silk don't come cheap.'

Titus handed her some notes and bowed, clicking his heels. 'That should cover it.'

Jo was outraged. She grabbed Mirabel's scissors with her free hand. 'You killed her, you bastard,' she snarled, lunging at Titus, scissors flashing silver in her hand.

He swatted her away. 'Plenty more where she came from.' He tightened his grip and pulled Jo towards the door and back into the tunnel.

He was in high spirits. 'Imagine the possibilities,' he said but Jo, sick and shocked as she felt, was desperately trying to work something out as he hurried her along.

The market was more crowded than normal. The demonstrators were mingling with the shoppers, handing out leaflets. Titus and Jo were jostled and shoved, but he maintained his tight grip. They were approaching the entrance to the market, when Jo made her move.

'He can corrupt my power, can he,' she thought grimly. They were right by the market sign. 'It's now or never,' she decided, and she focussed her new-found ability to heal directly on his wicked, evil heart. As she transmitted waves of warmth and kindness towards him he cried out in alarm and pain and dropped her wrist, clutching at his chest.

Jo ran. Half-forgotten memories flooded into her mind, steering her to a place where she could hide with others, like her, on the run from the VMN. She wove her way through the crowds away from the market, across the road and up the hill. She could see a white circular pillbox ahead of her. 'Let the door be unlocked,' she prayed, and it was.

Chapter Fifteen – Paul

Matthew and Mary were watching Paul playing with Calico's latest litter of kittens.

'He's doing very well,' observed Matthew.

'Hmm,' said Mary. 'But he's still holding out. There's something he doesn't want to face.'

'Does it matter?' asked Matthew.

'You know it does.'

'Ali knows what it is,' said Matthew slowly. 'But she doesn't want him to know she knows. So they are both holding back.'

'Just as well she's gone shopping, then,' said Mary. Her face was determined. 'Come on, Midge.'



Paul sighed. 'There's nothing left to remember.'

'We think there is,' said Matthew. 'Something that gives Lethe power over you.'

'So all she has to do is wave her hand and you're as weak as a kitten again.' Mary watched Paul carefully. She applied a little more pressure. 'And then you're no good to Ali or Jo.'

Paul was riled, as she had intended. 'The way I see it, you could just get inside my head and work it out for yourselves anyway.'

Matthew shook his head. 'We undoubtedly could, but the point is that you need to remember, not that we need to know. You're the one who has to live with whatever it is you're trying so hard to forget.'

'She made me forget,' argued Paul. 'She is very powerful.'

'And as long as you block it out, you help make her more powerful,' goaded Mary. 'You're doing her work for her and she'll control you. The faithful dog and the cruel mistress.'

For a moment Paul looked like he might hit her. He closed his eyes, held his breath and exhaled deeply. 'Let's get on with it, then,' he muttered angrily.

Back off, Mary, emped Matthew. 'Paul. I want you to remember the night Lethe came to take Jo to Paris.'

We know there was a row before she wiped you. What can you remember?’

Paul sighed with exasperation. ‘We’ve gone over this time and time again,’ he grumbled. ‘I was stood here, Lethe was by the sofa and Ali was by the doorway. Lethe was being her usual stubborn self. She said, *That girl has amazing potential. You just want to keep her hidden away in this backwater.*

I was furious. I said something like, *This backwater, as you so condescendingly call it, is less than forty minutes away from London. It’s a safe place for Jo to grow. For now, we can teach her all she needs.*

Needless to say, Lethe just laughed, saying, *You could teach her well enough, I suppose. But your narrow view of the world will hold her back. She will be earthbound when she should fly.*

That made Ali really wild. She went for Lethe. *Your way is not necessarily the best, Lethe. I hate to judge but you push me to it. You are short on compassion and tolerance and you always have been. You have misused your talent...*

Then Lethe interrupted. *I use my ability responsibly, Alithea. Since the Riots there is much work to be done.*

And I just said, *Much meddling, you mean.*’ He paused for breath. ‘That’s it. That’s all I remember. Jo came home and we stopped arguing.’

Matthew and Mary exchanged glances.

‘That’s not it, Paul,’ countered Mary ‘We always stop here. You’re holding back. You had dinner, Ali went to make coffee. What happened then?’

Paul exploded. ‘I told you I don’t bloody remember!’

Matthew and Mary both jumped. Calico hissed at Paul, protecting her kittens against his anger.

Paul stared at Calico a long moment. Something stirred deep in his memory as he looked at the little cat. He reached down and offered an apologetic hand and gently stroked her head. When he eventually spoke, his voice sounded haunted.

‘We were looking at Calico’s kittens and Lethe spouted some poetry. *One forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath.* Complete nonsense.’

'So what did you say?' gently prompted Matthew.

'Something like, *This velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang.* Whatever that means.'

'What does it mean, Paul?'

'How the hell would I know?' he snapped, but even as he did, he could hear again Lethe's mocking words.

You know well enough, Paul. Your father and I once shared a passion, Jo, for Herman Melville's books. Especially The Whale. Do you still have that first edition I bought you, dear?

Mary and Matthew watched as Paul leapt to his feet and went over to the bookcase. At first he couldn't find what he was looking for, then he pulled out a very old, dusty book. He opened it carefully. '1851. *The Whale*. Later it was called *Moby Dick*.' He turned the page slowly and stared at the inscription.

'What does it say?' asked Matthew.

'It just says *To Paul. With love from Lethe.* No big deal.' Despite his offhand words Paul looked uncomfortable. He closed the book carefully and looked at it for a long time.

'So what happened next?' asked Mary.

Paul concentrated. 'I lost my temper with Jo,' he said at last. He looked stricken. 'She defied me. I was so astonished I sent her to her room. We've already been over this.'

'And we'll keep on going over it until you remember,' said Mary irritably. Paul sighed with exasperation but closed his eyes anyway. And the past shimmered in his mind like a mirage in a desert. He spoke as if in a dream, remembering the angry words that had been exchanged.

Why are you both being so stubborn? I only want the best for Jo. A week in Paris! Nowadays most girls can only dream of such an opportunity

Before the Riots, Lethe, a visit to Paris was within the reach of most people. Not a chosen few with good connections. Your organisation changed all that.

Still the champion of the underdog, I see. Well, the underdog would bite your hand off if it could, Paul. My organisation has restored discipline and order.

Dammit, Lethe! Don't you ever question what is being done to ordinary people in this country by the VMN?

The last time I checked the ordinary people seemed happy enough. Unlike you, some people appreciate structure and boundaries.

As it happens, structure and boundaries are exactly what we want for Jo at the moment. What we don't want is for you to turn Jo's head with your wealth and power before she has had a chance to make up her own mind about the choices ahead of her.

She does not need choice. She needs guidance. It's important she comes to the right conclusions. Left to you, Jo will end up using a fraction of her talent. She'll be scrimping when she could be enjoying the good things in life – settling for the familiar when she could be exploring the world. A proper little stay-at-home.

Paul returned to the present. 'I've always hated it when Lethe puts Ali down.'

'Go deeper, Paul,' urged Matthew. 'She said *A proper little stay-at-home*. What came next?'

'Search me,' said Paul. Mary raised an eyebrow. He grimaced and sighed, resistant and resentful. There was a long silence as he seemed to struggle with himself. He looked up to the left, his eyes out of focus as the past ran in his mind like a crackly old film. 'What came next?' he echoed, then he closed his eyes, and turned to face the other way. 'Oh, Ali took the stay-at-home crack personally. Thought Lethe was getting at her. Which she was.'

Like me, you mean.

Like both of you. Good grief – Ali, Paul, when we were young we blazed! The three of us – crackling with ideas and energy. You two just threw it all away.'

Paul paused, his face troubled, his eyes clouded. Matthew picked up the old, dusty book, and placed it in Paul's unresisting hands. And from far away, Paul's final words before he was wiped came back to him.

There were four of us when we blazed, as you put it. I remember it well. And I wish I didn't.

He remembered how Lethe had smiled triumphantly.
Done. My pleasure. You only had to ask.

'There were four of us,' whispered Paul.

His face was anguished as the memories flooded back. 'Lethe, Quinn, Ali and me. Quinn. How could I have forgotten about Quinn?'

'Tell us about him,' said Matthew quietly.

'To begin with, I had no intention of being his friend. He broke Ali's heart. I was afraid she came to me on the rebound and I was jealous.' The words, so long repressed, tumbled over themselves. 'But all that faded and I began to really like the guy. I suppose you could say that Quinn was the best friend I ever had. For a while we were quite a foursome. And then... then I betrayed him and he never spoke to me again.' Realisation and horror slowly dawned. 'And now he's dead and it's too late to put it right.'

'How did you betray him?' asked Matthew softly.

'He found me with Lethe.' Paul twisted his hands together as he struggled to find the words. 'I had a message. *On Midsummer's Eve, meet me at sunset where the willow weeps and the river bends.* So I went.' Paul's face was stricken. 'If only I could undo it!'

'Undo what?' Ali stood in the doorway, her arms full of shopping.

Paul thought fast. 'Shouting at Jo about going to Paris. Our last conversation was a quarrel.'

'That wasn't your last conversation,' said Ali firmly. 'And I doubt if it was your last quarrel either. We will find her, Paul, and we will bring her home.'



Zebo was withdrawn and silent. He had barely said a word since hearing of Lucy's death. The Ferals and Jo were all in Crazy Em's old room, the day after Jo had escaped from Titus.

'I'm not going to beg them,' thought Jo resentfully. Out loud she said, 'It's very simple. I need a place to stay where they won't find me. You need money and I've got plenty. By the time they thought to close down my account, I'd emptied it. But more importantly, we need to rescue those kids.'

Zebo looked at the others. 'Wheezy? Shall we let her stay?'

Wheezy shrugged. 'Might as well. Lucy's dead, and Paddy's vanished, and Melanie went home to Mummy. And the money's useful.'

Zebo turned to the silent little girl sitting next to Wheezy. 'Yes or no, June?'

June nodded her head.

'June never speaks,' observed Jo.

'Only to me,' said Wheezy. June smiled at him.

'So you stay,' said Zebo. 'Now where's this Smokey you told us about? He's late.'

Jo laughed. 'He arrived five minutes ago. He's standing by the door.' Everyone stared as Smokey seemed to materialise from nowhere.

Zebo was impressed. He was about to welcome Smokey but the visitor was clearly furious. He glared at Jo.

'So you didn't destroy the RAINBOW machine!'

'How could I?' Jo was immediately angry and defensive. 'I haven't been back since I found out about Scorpion Grass and CUT. Anyway, it's no good to them without me to operate it. But if you're so worried, you could go and pour a jug of water over the keyboard. No-one will notice you.'

'I suppose I'd better finish what you've left undone,' said Smokey snidely.

'I impeded you to come and help, not lecture me,' said Jo heatedly. All they had seen at the farm had created a tension between them and sniping and sarcasm was the result. 'Our priority now is to locate this CUT place and get those kids out.'

'Of course, O leader,' he said. 'Who died and made you Queen?'

'Lucy,' she said flatly. Zebo flinched and closed his eyes. 'Now are you going to help or not?'

'I'll help,' he said sulkily.

'Good, because you're the only one who can get into Titus's office and look at his papers. There must be something connecting him with the place. It looks like

an old barracks – maybe it's an ex-military site, or a disused prison. And don't forget the lighthouse.'

Zebo made a huge effort to focus on the moment. 'From what you said it's not big enough for a lighthouse. It's probably a London River light. I reckon this place is somewhere on the Thames estuary.'

Jo was impressed. 'How do you know that?' she asked.

'My great-grandfather knew a thing or two about the river,' answered Zebo. 'I've got smuggler's blood in my veins.'

'So what are we going to do when we find it?' Smokey was drawn in despite himself.

'I think we need to join up with The Righteous,' said Zebo. 'We can't do it on our own.'

'I agree,' said Jo. 'Who's their leader?'

'Dunno,' he said. 'Probably Reg. He's alright. I'll put the word out.'

'That name rings a bell,' said Jo, but the memory eluded her. She struggled to remember, then realised that Zebo was studying her carefully. 'What is it?' she asked, feeling self-conscious.

'I've been thinking,' he said. 'Everyone's going to be looking for you, right? And if they find you then they'll find us and we don't want that. I reckon your hair is a giveaway. It's like a beacon. It's got to go.' He rummaged in a drawer and brandished an electric shaver.

'No way,' gasped Jo. 'I'll look like a boy!'

'Even better,' replied Zebo. 'We'll call you Joe with an E. Ha! Joey!'

Jo was adamant. 'No.'

'What else do you suggest?' Zebo was implacable as he switched on the razor.

Jo spoke softly, with a note of pleading. 'But I don't want to.'

'Tough.' Zebo was unsympathetic. 'I bet that Mama of yours is going to offer a great big reward for finding you. Wouldn't want one of the Righteous to get tempted.'

'What about you Ferals?' said Jo resentfully as she reluctantly sat down in front of him. 'Wouldn't you be tempted by a reward?'

Zebo laughed. 'Yeah, but I reckon the longer they look for you, the bigger the reward will get. So there's no hurry to hand you over.'

'Well, that's a relief,' said Jo, with a lightness she did not feel.

In no time at all Jo was completely shorn. 'There,' said Zebo. 'All done.' He handed her some scruffy old clothes. 'Put these on,' he ordered. 'And keep that locket out of sight. Someone might take a fancy to it.'

Jo looked again at the locket she had found. There was Mama, looking younger and happier, more relaxed than Jo would have believed possible, and a smiling, dark-haired man she was sure was her father. But he was supposed to have disappeared before she was born! She only had Titus's word for that, though. On a tiny scroll of paper in faded writing was the inscription *I hold you in my heart.*

'There's no going back now,' thought Jo, and her eyes filled with tears.

You're well out of it, emped Smokey. She still found it disconcerting to be emped, but she recognised an olive branch and sent him a subdued ***Thank you.*** What had he said when they first met? 'It's hereditary. Try calling your mother.'

'One last message,' she thought sadly and after some consideration she emped her mother. ***Mama, I'm safe. Don't try to find me.*** Then she relented and added, ***Thank you for all you've done.***

Tough call, kid, emped Smokey. ***Now put your shield up.***

Jo nodded. Tough call.



Ali was reeling. 'She emped me,' she cried! 'Jo emped me!'

'What did she say?' asked Matthew eagerly.

'It was *Mama, I'm safe. Don't try to find me.*' Ali's initial joy was fading even as she spoke. 'She thanked

me, but she seemed cold. And she never calls me Mama. Something's wrong.'

Matthew spoke gently. 'The message was for Lethe, Ali.'

There was a long silence.

'She still doesn't remember me,' said Ali. Her eyes were wet.

'She will.' Matthew spoke with calm certainty. 'At least she's escaped from Lethe. And you could try emptying her back.'

'I tried,' she said, disappointment written all over her face. 'But it's no good. All these months it's been as if there's no-one there. Now, she's there alright, but her shield is up and I can't get through.'

'She is safe. That's the main thing.'

Ali nodded. 'I must tell Paul.'

Even as she spoke the door burst open and Paul came in, full of excitement.

'She's found the locket!' he cried. 'It's moved!'

'Oh, Paul,' said Ali, 'how do you know Jo has it? Maybe someone else picked it up.'

He refused to be deflated. 'I know she has it. It's back where it belongs,' he said, 'so now we can find where they've been keeping her!'

'She's escaped from Lethe,' said Ali. 'She just emped me. But...'

'But nothing,' said Paul. 'We are going to find her. Where's that A to Z?' He looked helplessly at the overflowing bookcase. Ali smiled, and went straight to the book. Paul opened it eagerly, and rummaged through the pages until he found the one he wanted. He closed his eyes, concentrated with all his might and main, and pointed at the map. 'It's a Tube station,' he said, disconcerted.

'Show me,' said Em. Paul took the book to her. 'I know where she is,' she whispered. 'That's my old place.' Overwhelmed by memories she turned her head away to hide the tears. She suddenly looked very old and frail. 'I can tell you where to find her, but I can't come with you. I never want to see the place again.'

Matthew stroked her hand. Her memories were an open book to him as she remembered being left for dead after the terrible beating she suffered at Lucy's hands.



'Someone's coming down the main stairs,' hissed Zebo. 'Scatter! Shields up!'

Jo, Smokey and the Ferals fled. Jo ran soundlessly along a corridor and up a short flight of steps to where a grating gave her a view of Em's room.

She looked down at the two people whose portraits were in her locket – the locket she had dropped in her haste. The man picked it up. Jo studied him carefully. He had such a kind face. Yet he had deserted her and Mama.

'She's not here, Paul,' said the woman sadly. 'The locket brought us here, but she's gone.' She was crying. Jo had never seen Mama cry before. In spite of everything she wanted to run and comfort her. It took all her self-discipline to remain hidden.

'No, but she has been,' he said. He held the woman closely and stroked her hair. How Jo longed to join them! But then she remembered Mama's role in the terrible film Smokey had shown her, and her resolve strengthened.

Jo's mother was writing a note. 'In case she comes back here, Paul. So she knows we love her and how to find us if she's forgotten the way home.'

She kissed the note softly, put it down on a table with the locket, a business card, some money and Jo's photograph album. She reached for the man's hand and they were gone. Jo waited until Smokey emped an **All clear** then ran back to read the note before the others got back. It said:

Dearest Jo,

We love and miss you so much and we want you to come home. We think something bad has happened to your memory. We can help. Just ring the number on the card and we'll come to you wherever you are, whenever you call.

Your loving Mum and Dad

'It's a trap,' said Smokey bluntly. 'And you'd better ditch that locket. That's how they traced you.'

'I know,' agreed Jo. She scooped up the money, and pushed the locket to the back of the table drawer. Her eyes glistened with tears.

Zebo took control. 'We can't stay here,' he said. 'This place will be swarming with Vermin before you know it. We'll go to Mickey's Shelter. Reg'll know what to do.'



Jo sat in the shadows at Mickey's Shelter flicking idly through the photographs in the album her mother had left. A smiling girl in a funny hat; Mama and this Paul bloke; a pretty tortoiseshell cat with some kittens. Just as a word can be on the tip of one's tongue, so it seemed to Jo that there were names and places just on the edge of her memory. She tried to catch the elusive, tantalising recollections, but they vanished like smoke. With a sigh she put the album in the pocket of the ancient old duffle coat Zebo had given her and studied the group of Righteous; one woman and three men. One of the men looked vaguely familiar and she guessed correctly that he was Reg. He introduced Charlie, a heavy-set Geordie, Omar, an astute, sharp-faced Pakistani, and Brenda who looked like everyone's idea of an ordinary middle-aged housewife. Zebo introduced Wheezy, June, Smokey and 'Joey'.

They all listened intently as Zebo told them about Lucy. Then Smokey told his story. As she listened, Jo shivered. The memories were so vivid and disturbing. Jo felt dirty; contaminated.

'Bastards,' said Reg, his face set. 'We have to find this CUT place now.'

'Right,' agreed Charlie. 'Find out how many staff there are; how many kids; what the security's like.'

'We'll need plans,' said Omar. 'And it would be useful to know the routines. Someone needs to get in there and have a good scout around.'

'That'll be me, then,' said Smokey. 'The boy no-one notices.' He managed to sound defensive and aggressive simultaneously.

Reg smiled. 'Anyone else got any special talents?'

'All of us Ferals are useful in a fight,' said Zebo enthusiastically, 'and we're a bit handy with alarms and cameras, as well. And I can break in pretty much anywhere. Guard dogs are my speciality.'

'Useful,' said Brenda. 'Can any of you emp?'

'I can,' said Smokey cautiously.

'Thought so. Then you and I will maintain communication.' She turned to Jo. 'How about you?'

What was it that dreadful old woman had said? *She can emp, she can truth-tell, she can deep-read and she can heal. She's got all these gifts but she don't know what to do with them.*

'My super-powers are a bit rusty at the moment,' said Jo, dead-pan. Everyone laughed. Reg looked at Jo for a long moment, a quizzical expression on his face. 'Have we met before today?' he said finally.

'Maybe back on Planet Krypton.'

Reg nodded, then turned back to Smokey. 'Soon as you've got any info, give me a shout. Then all we need to do is get in, sort out the staff and rescue the kids. Piece of cake.'

Chapter Sixteen – Zebo

Smokey was the closest he ever got to being excited. 'I've found the place,' he said. 'I got into Titus's office easily enough. He wasn't there. Apparently someone put him in a wheelchair a little while back.' He looked directly at 'Joey'. **Good move.** 'Nothing like a power crazed dictator for an efficient filing system, including maps and plans. So I paid CUT a little visit.'

He spread some papers out for the group to see. 'It's an ex-Ministry of Defence site on the Essex coast. There's a manned sentry post and barrier and one main building where the staff and children are. A hundred years before the military took it over it was a gunpowder factory. There are lots of outbuildings but they're empty – I guess Titus has plans for expansion. The local people think it's a correction centre for delinquents and give it a wide berth.'

Reg winked at Smokey. 'Well done,' he said. Smokey looked proud and embarrassed at the same time. 'How many staff and children?'

'About thirty kids and twelve staff. I made copies of all their files.'

Zebo nodded his approval. 'Good work, kid. What's the security like?'

Smokey looked dismissive. 'They're complacent,' he said. 'I've got plans of the alarms and surveillance cameras, but it's not state of the art.'

Zebo grinned. 'It'll be like falling off a log.'

'Any special routines?' asked Omar.

'Yes,' answered Smokey. 'There's a staff meeting every morning. They lock the kids in and one person stands guard. Sometimes Stigma and Lacuna go to the staff meetings.'

That's useful,' said Reg thoughtfully. 'Very useful.'

'Is your team sorted, Reg?' asked Zebo

Reg pulled a face. 'In a way I could do with more people,' came the answer. 'On the other hand I want to keep this operation small so maybe it's just as well. I've got five mini-buses, a team of drivers, some medics

and a bit of muscle as well. We'll get the staff out of the way, load up the kids and get them out of there.'

'Won't the staff put up a fight?' asked Smokey.

'I'm working on that,' said Reg and refused to be drawn further.

'Where will you take the children?' asked Jo.

'Makes sense to use the Sunbeam Farms,' said Smokey.

'Have you lost your mind?' said Jo in disbelief. 'They're just a façade for the Vermin!'

'Maybe so, but the staff are on the level. They don't know anything about CUT. They're fully equipped to work with damaged kids.'

'Good thinking.' Reg smiled at Smokey, then turned to Zebo. 'I'll need you Ferals to take care of the phones, alarms, cameras and the locks. Any ideas how you might get in?'

Zebo studied the map. 'Bit of a free-trade area, that,' he said.

'Free-trade?' said Brenda, puzzled.

'Smuggling,' said Zebo. 'My great-granddad had a few tales to tell about *The Three Daws* at Gravesend. They had seven staircases so you could always make a swift exit if the customs men came along. And there were secret tunnels. Passed down from father to son, that information.'

Reg was impressed. 'Worth investigating,' he said.

Zebo nodded. 'I reckon we can sneak in easily enough. No problem. But how will your convoy get past the entrance barrier and the guard?'

'Working on that too,' said Reg. 'Wait and see.'

'Don't wait too long,' said Smokey. 'Some of those kids are in a bad way.'



Four days later Jo, Smokey and the Ferals were cramped, cross and uncomfortable. They had travelled under cover of darkness the previous evening and spent most of the night in a disused storehouse trying, and failing, to sleep. Dawn was breaking when they stood in a small copse, watching Zebo search the undergrowth.

'It's here somewhere,' he said. 'But it's been a long time. I was just a nipper when I came here. My dad said there was a castle here once, but that's long gone.'

'Never mind the history lesson,' said Smokey irritably. 'Hurry up. It's getting light.'

'Beats me why we couldn't break in last night when it was dark,' said Wheezy.

'Because Reg wants to get them off guard,' answered Jo. 'He wants them to wake up to a perfectly normal day. He doesn't want anyone getting hurt if it can be avoided.'

Wheezy looked disappointed. 'I was looking forward to a fight,' he muttered.

Zebo was at the end of his tether. 'I can't find it,' he grumbled.

'I told you we should have done a dummy run,' muttered Smokey.

'And double our chances of being caught,' snapped Zebo. 'Oh, where the devil is it?'

'Picture it in your mind,' said Jo.

'What the hell for?' he said, irritated.

'Oh, just do it,' she said wearily, and to her surprise he did. Jo concentrated. 'Over there.' She pointed to a seemingly impenetrable mass of foliage and brambles.

'You'd better be right.' Zebo ungraciously set about pulling away the branches and briars. He swore steadily and monotonously as he did, then his tone changed. 'Spot on. This is it. Come on.'

As the sky began to grow light they watched as Zebo seemed to disappear in the bushes, then followed him into the shadows. Jo was the last to go, and she made sure that no-one could see where they'd been, pulling the branches back over the long forgotten tunnel entrance.

Chapter Seventeen – CUT

'Good morning, Madame Lacuna,' said the uniformed man at the main gate. 'Everyone's expecting you. They are gathered in the Blue Room.'

'Thank you, Robert.' Madame dazzled him with her elegance and beauty. 'I'd like you to join me. Charles will relieve you.'

Robert took Charles' seat in the back of the forget-me-not blue car. He glanced at the chauffeur. 'No Sebastian today?'

She laughed. 'And no limousine either, alas. Sebastian's taken it for a service. Titus telephoned and told me we had an urgent situation. I had to come straight here.'

'How is Mr. Stigmurus?' asked Robert politely.

She sighed. 'His recovery is very slow. But his mind is as active as ever. We can only hope.' She smiled a brave smile. 'Drive on, chauffeur.'

The forget-me-not blue car swept down the drive shadowed by a fleet of VMN vehicles.

Jo was heartily sick of crawling on her hands and knees. Everyone was crotchety through lack of sleep. 'Just all shut up,' Zebo had said, exasperated by their grumbles, so the reluctant group inched along the abandoned smugglers' tunnels in resentful silence, interspersed only with muttered curses.

Jo was thinking hard. In the tunnel she could read Zebo easily. She searched his mind and discovered what she already half-knew. As far as Zebo was concerned she was just a hostage. He'd brought her along to keep an eye on her, not because he wanted her help. When the rescue was over he intended to get the highest price he could for Jo's return.

'Eventually I'll have to fight him,' thought Jo grimly. She remembered how she had dealt with Titus and Sebastian. Feeling guilty but determined, she concentrated on Zebo, holding his image in her mind's eye and inflicting a sharp pinch. She was gratified to hear him gasp with pain and stopped immediately.

What the hell are you doing? Smokey emped her, furious.

Guarding my back, she emped back defiantly and put up her shield to shut him out.

'We're almost there,' whispered Zebo. They had reached the mouth of the tunnel. Rotting wood and rubble partially blocked the way out. Everyone worked silently and steadily to clear a way through.

They broke through into a tumbledown shack. A narrow slit of a window gave a glimpse of marshes, and beyond that, the river. Patches of iron grey sky could be seen through what remained of the roof. The woodworm infested door swung on rusted hinges, creaking in the piercing, salt-laden wind. A short overgrown track led directly to the CUT buildings.

They waited in silence, shivering as the icy wind whistled and hail began to fall. 'Hard rain,' thought Jo. The memory of a song danced in her mind.

Everyone was watching Smokey as he waited for Brenda's signal. Jo let down her shield so she could listen in. At last the message came. ***Now.*** Silently, stealthily, the group moved forward. All the time Zebo maintained a watchful eye on Jo.

'Good morning, Madame Lacuna.' The beautiful young woman with the cold, lifeless eyes was frowning. 'Is something the matter?'

'Everything is under control, Bridget. No need for alarm.' The reply was reassuring. 'Is everyone here?'

Bridget checked the group of worried looking staff members. 'All accounted for,' she said, 'apart from David. He is guarding the children.'

'Call him up, please, and tell him to come straight away. The children are perfectly safe. VergissMeinNicht has everything under control.'

Bridget spoke briefly into the intercom. 'He's on his way,' she said and in a few moments a flustered looking man carrying an enormous briefcase came into the room. His manner was officious.

'This is most unorthodox,' he complained, but he was shushed into silence by his colleagues.

'David is quite correct, as ever,' said Madame Lacuna. She disarmed him with a sweet smile. 'But extraordinary events call for drastic measures. VergissMeinNicht has been infiltrated.' There was a gasp from the group as alarm spread rapidly. 'Our enemies have discovered this facility and are spreading lies about the work we do here. I am ordering an immediate evacuation. All Scorpion Grass personnel will be taken to a top secret location where new identities await you. Rest assured, we know all too well the value of each and every one of you. There will always be a need for your special talents. Alternative arrangements have been made for the children.' She surveyed them all. 'There is no time to waste. The transport is outside. You will leave immediately.'

A buzz of consternation filled the room. She raised one immaculately gloved hand. 'One thing more. I want each one of you to remember something very important.' All eyes were on the speaker. She spoke slowly and steadily. 'I want you to remember what it was that set you on the path that led you to Scorpion Grass. Remember who first taught you to torture, corrupt and kill. Remember how it was when your innocence was betrayed. Remember.'

The effect was remarkable. The group of hard-faced, steely-eyed adults seemed to diminish as the long-forgotten children they had once been took over. Some wept silently; others rocked and whimpered. Bridget pushed her fist into her mouth, trying to stifle her staccato screams. David stared straight ahead, cradling his briefcase, his face a mask of frozen horror.

A small group of people wearing the VMN insignia came into the room and led the compliant, unresisting staff to the waiting bus. An outrider escorted the bus as it set off for the main gate.

The beautiful woman with the copper coloured hair and the green eyes stood at the window and watched them go. As the bus disappeared from view her body sagged and her eyes filled with tears. The door opened

and a man wearing a chauffeur's uniform strode in and took her in his arms.

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Chapter Eighteen – The Trap

During the staff meeting the Ferals efficiently dismantled alarms, unplugged telephones and unlocked doors. As soon as the staff bus pulled away, Reg and his group began the task of reassuring the children and leading them to the waiting transport.

Reg had not reckoned on their mistrust and resistance. 'It's like herding cats,' he grumbled to himself, as some of the children fought and clawed, refusing to be moved. Others withdrew into their own private world, keening quietly. Some made their bodies slack and heavy. In desperation Reg called for Zebo and the Ferals.

'You talk to them,' he said. 'They won't listen to me.'

Zebo looked steadily at the corrupted and broken children then pounced on one of the older boys, a chunky lad with a crew-cut. Home-made tattoos covered his burly arms, almost, but not quite, concealing small, circular burn marks. Zebo got the boy in a half-nelson and hollered for quiet. He turned to the lad who was wriggling and kicking to get free. 'Paddy,' he said, almost tenderly. 'Calm down. It's me, mate. It's Zebo.' He was close to tears, but his face was fierce and proud. 'Tell them who I am.'

'Oh, Zebo,' said Paddy, his voice cracking. 'The bastards got you too.'

Zebo shook his head. 'They never did,' he said proudly, 'and they never will... I'm with the good guys. But we have to get out of here now. Tell them we've come to rescue them.'

Paddy raised Zebo's hand. The room was silent. Paddy's voice rang out. 'This is Zebo. My foster-brother. If he says we can trust these people, then we can.'

'Everyone got that?' said Zebo. 'Good. Now let's go!'

As the room began to empty Zebo suddenly remembered Jo. He looked round, but she was nowhere to be seen.



Paul's voice was husky. 'You fooled them,' he said. 'I am so proud of you.' He buried his face in Ali's hair. 'You damn near fooled me, too.'

She was shaking. 'I was so scared,' she said.

'Me too.' He breathed deeply and slowly. 'I have to tell you something,' he whispered. 'I should have told you years ago. When we were at college, one Midsummer's Eve, I found a note.' His voice faltered, but he made himself plough on. 'It said *Meet me at sunset where the willow weeps and the river bends*. So I went...'

Ali interrupted him urgently. 'Paul! She's here! Jo's here!'

Outside the door they heard the sound of running feet.

Jo was not running away from Zebo, although that was a bonus. She was running towards the sound of muffled, terrified sobs emped from somewhere underground. She sped through deserted rooms, the heart-breaking sounds getting nearer and nearer, until she found herself staring at the open gate of a metal cage. As she stepped into the claustrophobic lift she could hear someone running after her.

I heard it too, emped Smokey. I want to help. Wait for me.

Yeah, right. And then you'll hand me over to Zebo and he'll turn me in for the reward money.

Jo coolly pressed the button to close the lift gate. As the old-fashioned mechanism ground into life and the cage began to slowly descend, she saw Smokey arrive, out of breath and furious.

The forget-me-not blue bus and the motorcyclist sped through the rain towards the nearby harbour town. The passengers were silent; still shocked, still haunted.

David looked out of the window at the dockyard silhouetted against the rising sun. He called to the driver. 'Are we leaving the country?'

There was no reply.

David looked around. Something wasn't right. There were no ships in the distinctive VMN forget-me-not blue.

Realisation slowly dawned. 'We've been tricked!' he gasped, and began banging on the partition – the specially reinforced partition – that separated the passengers from the driver. Instantly he emped the word **Nightshade**, the VMN distress call. Omar grinned to himself, and drove faster. He signalled the motorcyclist. Brenda emped Smokey and Ali. **They've realised. Expect visitors.**

Angry faces stared out of the windows and fists pounded on bullet proof glass as the occupants of the mini-bus tried in vain to break out. Omar drove into a large lorry park, stopped the bus (none too gently) and got out, wearing a full-face motor-cycle helmet. He gave a cheery wave to the trapped passengers before climbing on the back of Brenda's motorbike and speeding away.

When they were well away from the lorry park, they pulled over by a telephone box. Omar made a quick call to a number he'd written down earlier. He grinned as the connection was made, then disguised his voice, trying not to laugh out loud as he spoke. 'Is that the harbour master? Well, mate, looks like there's a bus load of illegal immigrants in your lorry park. Light blue mini-bus.' He gave the registration number, then rang off and threw the bus keys into the sea.

Chapter Nineteen – Reunion

The rescued children, the Ferals and the Righteous were nearly all safely in the buses. Zebo kept close to Paddy. Wheezy hung back. He pulled Zebo's sleeve. 'What about the reward money?' he whispered.

Zebo shrugged. 'It will have to wait, Wheezy. I'm not leaving Paddy. I thought we'd lost him. I don't know what they've done to him here. But I'm going to make sure he gets all the help he needs. Then we'll think about the money.'

The drivers started the engines, impatient to be off. 'Come on,' shouted Reg to Ali and Paul. 'Time we were gone.'

'Jo's here,' shouted Ali above the noise of the engines. 'We've got to find her. You go on.' She stood defiantly, with Paul, Matthew and Mary clearly supporting her decision to stay. Reg sighed. He got off the bus and spoke to the driver at the head of the convoy. 'Avoid the London road, Charlie,' he said. 'Head east when you get out of the gate. Good luck.'

They stood in the rain and watched as the convoy disappeared from view, turning right when it reached the distant, now deserted sentry post.

Ali looked distraught. 'I know she's here! I felt her. Her shield was down, but now it's back up and I don't know where to begin.'

'We will search every inch of this hell-hole,' promised Paul. 'We will find her.'

'Hold on,' said Reg urgently. 'Something's up.' He was looking towards the main gate.

'Why on earth is Charlie coming back?' asked Matthew, bewildered, as two forget-me-not blue jeeps and a red sports car swept into view.

'It's not Charlie,' said Reg. 'This lot came from the opposite direction. It's the Vermin.'



The sobbing was much louder now. ***I'm coming to help you,*** emped Jo. The lift juddered to a halt and Jo stepped out into a large, vaulted cellar. The air was dank and musty, impregnated with a strong smell of

sulphur. Facing her was a heavy, studded oak door. She walked towards it, fearful of what she would find. Behind her the lift began to rise.



Ali looked at the line of approaching vehicles. 'Lethe is with them,' she said. Her face was dark with anger. 'Come on, Paul. Let's find Jo before she does.' Together they ran into the building. Reg went after them.

'Emp Brenda,' he gasped. 'Tell her and Omar to get back here as quick as they can, and call for some back-up.' Ali nodded in agreement. 'You search in here,' said Reg, and I'll keep them busy for as long as I can.' He ran back outside, the rain stinging his face.

Mary stepped forward into the road. 'Take my hand, Matthew,' she commanded. Her back was straight, her eyes glittered and her face was fierce. The first vehicle was bearing down on them. Mary looked into the eyes of the driver and concentrated. She located his twisted, wicked, mean little mind. **'Forget how to drive,'** she commanded, and his face crumpled with confusion as he lost control of his vehicle.

Hail lashed the windscreen and hailstones made the road lethal. The leading vehicle began to skid toward the treacherous marshland.

Mary laughed as the hail fell harder. She and Matthew were soaked to the skin. The second driver could not believe his eyes as the mad old woman stared at him, cackling wildly. Then he too found himself skidding towards the marshes where the first bus was slowly sinking into the oozing mud.

The red sports car was nearly upon them. Mary looked into the cold, cruel eyes of Titus Stigmurus. She tried desperately to reach into his mind but he looked right back, unflinching, and drove straight at her, forcing the old couple off the road. The car stopped and Lethe emerged, followed by Titus, leaning heavily on a walking stick.

'So, old woman,' said Lethe, her voice icy cold. 'We meet again. Clearly you need to be reminded of my power.' She raised her elegantly gloved hand, and smiled a humourless smile as Matthew and Mary, still

holding hands, stood defiantly in front of the door. 'You were no match for me when I was still learning,' she hissed, 'so whatever makes you think you can defy me now?'

'You're wasting time, Lethe,' said Titus impatiently. 'Your precious sister has run rings around our expensive and highly trained morons and according to my sources your brat of a niece is here as well. She damn near took my powers away and I'm going to get them back. With interest.' He pushed his way past Matthew and Mary.

Reg suddenly appeared and charged headlong at Titus. Taken off-balance, Titus staggered, recovered, and pulled out his gun. Before he could take aim Reg knocked it out of his hand and sent it spinning away. As Reg lunged after it, Titus felled him with a hefty blow to the back of the neck from his walking stick. Reg sprawled unconscious on the ground. Breathing heavily, Titus bent to retrieve the gun, then aimed a clumsy kick at Reg. He was red in the face and winded. A vein throbbed in his forehead.

Lethe looked at him with contempt then turned to her old teachers. 'Such ancient, faded has-beens,' she said cruelly. 'Such long, long lives – so full of mistakes and regrets. So much to forget.'

She focussed on Mary, whose steely gaze met Lethe's without flinching. 'It must have been so demeaning for the high-and-mighty Miss Mary Montgomery, living like a bag-lady, forgotten by everyone. No-one to remember your cleverness; no-one to comfort you. It must have been terrible. No job, no money, no friends. Nothing to show for all your hard work. How lonely you must have been.'

'She's not alone now,' said Matthew. 'Be careful, Mary. Don't let her in!'

Lethe laughed scornfully. 'As if you could keep me out, old man.' She turned to Mary and spoke softly. 'How can you bear to remember the things you did to survive? They all abandoned you, Mary. Do you really want to remember how they stripped you of your dignity?'

It was Crazy Em who replied. 'I've forgotten many a thing in my time, Miss Lake, but never once what you done to me.' Lethe was momentarily startled.

'Mary, said Matthew tenderly, 'I never stopped looking for you.' He squeezed her hand, then looked directly at Lethe. 'Try and remember one single person, Lethe, who will care that much about you.'

Lethe was clearly taken aback. Before she had the chance to respond, Titus pulled her away roughly. 'You're wasting time,' he snapped. 'They're not worth bothering with. Now let's get the girl.'

He pushed open the door and pulled Lethe after him. Her face was white with rage. 'I haven't finished with you,' she snarled to Mary as the door closed behind her.

Matthew looked at Mary. For the first time he truly understood the horrors Crazy Em had lived through. He kissed her tenderly and said, 'Don't leave me again, my love.'

Chapter Twenty – Hard Rain

The stink of urine mingled with the smell of sulphur and dust. Jo carefully pushed open the door. A single shaft of light illuminated the dank storeroom. Old packing cases and barrels were pushed to the edges, leaving the centre of the room empty apart from the naked Chinese girl, gagged and blindfolded; bound with duct tape. Bizarrely, a wire was tied around her skinny little ankle, leading to a wrought iron post with some sort of heavy, weighted sliding mechanism at the top. Clearly if the wire was moved, even slightly, the heavy weight would fall and make contact with the chamber halfway down the post.

Nearby was an old wooden barrel, bound top and bottom with metal bands. On the side in dark grey capital letters, were stencilled the words ESKI XX GUNPOWDER.

I'm here, emped Jo. You're safe now.

Don't touch the wire! The girl was clearly terrified. ***They wired me up to the poacher scarer. They said if I moved I would be blown to pieces.***

Jo was momentarily baffled, then she realised. 'It's like a giant cap gun,' she thought. 'There's something in the chamber that will go off with an almighty bang when the weight falls.' She looked at the crude booby trap and felt her anger growing like a tidal wave.

'We'll soon be out of here,' she said cheerfully and she tenderly wrapped her duffel coat round the girl as she undid the blindfold and removed the gag. 'What's your name?' she asked as she began carefully unwinding the wire round the girl's ankle.

The girl shook her head. 'I can't remember' she said angrily. 'They call me Lotus, but that's not my name.'

'Well, I've got to call you something,' said Jo. 'What's your favourite name?'

The girl thought for a moment. 'I like Lanying.' She smiled a little.

'Who did this to you, Lanying?'

'Bridget and David. I wouldn't... I couldn't do what Bridget said, and she told David. He said I had to be

punished, and they brought me here. It was after breakfast. I think it was yesterday... but I'm not sure.'

Anger surged through Jo, but she kept her tone light. 'Almost done, Lanying.'

She carefully untwisted the strands of wire from Lanying's leg and then suddenly the razor-sharp end of one strand sprang free and sliced her palm. Startled, she dropped the wire, which released the sliding mechanism of the poacher scarer. It dropped like a stone towards the cartridge in the chamber.

Ali felt Jo's terror like a knife through her soul. 'This way!' she said, fear clutching at her heart. Everyone followed her.

In the blink of an eye Jo saw the weight fall. She yanked Lanying from the chair and cradled her in her arms. Jo screwed her eyes up tight.

Nothing happened.

Without relaxing her hold on Lanying, Jo risked a look. Smokey was standing there, red-faced and panting, with his finger jammed between the weight and the chamber.

They looked at each other in shock. For a moment none of them dared to move or breathe. Jo looked at Smokey in astonishment.

'If it's all the same to you,' said Smokey 'I could do with some help – my finger is killing me!' As quickly and as carefully as they could they reset the mechanism. As soon as he was free, Smokey grabbed Jo and pulled her close. They clung to each other for dear life.

'Are you alright?' he gasped. Jo nodded, too shocked to speak. She was suddenly aware of Smokey's arms around her, the touch of his skin, the smell of his hair, the male otherness of his body. Her own body responded to his. She longed to just melt into him. 'Thank God,' he said, his voice shaky with relief. 'Thank God.'

Jo found her voice. 'This is Lanying,' she said. 'They put her here to punish her.' She was going to say more, then remembered Bridget was Smokey's sister and clammed up. It made no difference. Smokey read her like a book. His face clouded, then became resolute.

'Let's get this tape off,' he said. Lanying winced as the tape pulled at her skin.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Nearly done.' He turned to Jo. 'Do you know gunpowder can become unstable, and spontaneously explode?'

'No,' she said, her hands shaking as she hurriedly pulled away the last piece of duct tape.

Lanying was free at last. She rose shakily to her feet, trembling like a new-born foal. Her legs felt strange after being in one position for so long. Smokey and Jo gently supported her. 'Come on!' he said. 'Let's get out of here.'

Jo hesitated. Smokey smiled at her. ***I'm not going to turn you in. I don't want their filthy money.*** She scanned him carefully, seeking out the truth, then smiled back.

The three of them headed for the lift. As they squeezed into the metal cage Jo was marvelling at Smokey. She was acutely aware of his closeness. She was also acutely aware of her horrible clothes, her dirty face and her shaven head. She must look a fright.

The lift slowly ascended to the ground floor and creaked to a halt. Smokey opened the gate. The three of them walked out and came face to face with a glamorous woman with copper hair and green eyes. She was out of breath from running. Her arms were outstretched, reaching for Jo.

'Get away from me!' screamed Jo and she ran back into the lift. She pushed the button again and again, but the old, worn mechanism finally gave up the ghost. Once pressed, the button stuck and would not pop back out. She was trapped.

'Jo, my darling, my girl, my lovely girl,' said the woman. 'It's me. It's your mum.' Her tears fell like rain.

Jo sobbed. 'I know what you did,' she cried. 'I know what you did.'

And then Paul was there with Crazy Em looking terrible, leaning on some old man she'd never seen and her mind was spinning out of control with confusion and rage. She banged the lift button again. Nothing. She looked wildly from face to face.

Now something strange was happening. Titus Stigmurus was there, and Paul was fighting with him. She could see not one, but two beautiful women. One curled her lip with disdain. Her glance raked Smokey, Jo and Lanying from head to toe. Her distaste was evident as she dismissed them. 'Jocasta's not here,' she said emphatically. She turned to Titus. 'Your informant took you for a fool.' Her voice was angry and contemptuous. 'A fool with no power other than money.'

A small part of Jo's mind wondered who had betrayed her. She assumed it was Zebo or Wheezy. Mostly she just stared at the two women, trying to find some sense, some meaning in what was happening.

'Who are you?' she cried. 'Which of you is my mother?'

'What matters,' said the woman who was crying, 'is who you are. You have to remember who you are. What is your name?'

'Jocasta Lacuna,' answered Jo. Her voice was uncertain. She stumbled over the words. 'Jocasta Lakota.'

Now the weeping woman was linking hands with Crazy Em and the old man.

'What is your true name?' they said.

'Johanna Lacuna.'

They asked again. This time the old man and old woman touched her hands.

'Johanna Lakota. Jo.' She looked deep into herself. 'My name is Jo Lakota.'

The disdainful woman looked appalled. 'Jocasta! Is it really you? What have they done to your beautiful hair! And where did you get those disgusting clothes, my angel? Tell me who did this and I will have them punished!'

'Welcome back, Johanna Lakota,' said the old man, ignoring Lethe. 'Remember what it means to be you.' His voice was kind but very firm and seemed to reach into the darkest shadows of Jo's soul. The locked doors and windows of the house of her memory sprang open.

Sunlight flooded in, banishing the darkness and confusion. She remembered a pretty cottage close to a Roman road that ran through the woods. She had a friend called Samantha. There was Calico, who had just had kittens. She was on her bike, in the rain, and she was going to Paris with her aunt. Overhead was the most wonderful rainbow she had ever seen. Her mother was called Ali. Her father's name was Paul and her aunt was called Lethe. They had quarrelled.

Now Jo was crying because she realised that she had her childhood back but somewhere along the line she had outgrown it. She looked again at the two women. She walked over to Paul, who was struggling to restrain Titus Stigmurus. 'Dad,' she said, 'tell me who my mother is.'

Paul hesitated. He started to speak but the old man interrupted. 'I am Matthew Jameson,' he said. 'I used to teach your mother and your aunt. Most of us in this room could answer your question, Jo. But you need to work this out for yourself or you will always wonder if you were deceived. Look deep inside yourself and you will find the truth.'

'I've just about had enough of this,' said Titus Stigmurus and he twisted out of Paul's grasp. All eyes turned to him. He had a gun aimed directly at Jo. 'Don't any of you think of using your damn powers on me because I will know and I promise you I will shoot her unless you do exactly what I say now. Jocasta – get in the car. Do it!'

Jo stood her ground, scared but defiant. 'I'm not going with you,' she gasped. 'You'll have to drag me.'

Titus reached out to grab her arm, then pulled back. 'Very clever,' he said. 'But I've learnt that contact with you is bad news. You don't get to pull that stunt a second time, young lady.'

Moving with unexpected speed he hooked his walking stick round Jo's neck. He kept the gun pointed at her head. 'The rest of you – get in there,' he barked, pointing at a store cupboard.

There was a cry of protest from Lethe. He grinned unpleasantly. 'Even you, my dear. I think you will be surprised at what *a fool with no power other than money* can achieve.'

He slammed the door shut then wedged a chair under the door handle and smiled to himself. 'Get moving,' he said to Jo, prodding her in the back with the gun.

Suddenly Smokey was there, blocking his path. Titus laughed. 'Where the hell did you spring from?' he enquired, his voice almost genial.

'I've been here all the time,' answered Smokey. 'You just didn't notice me.' Then he charged at Titus, and tried to wrestle the gun from his grip. As their hands made contact Titus gave a laugh of triumph and disappeared. In that same moment Smokey was clearly visible. He looked around wildly.

Jo felt a sudden tug on the walking stick. To her horror her eyes met Smokey's as Titus reappeared behind him, took aim and fired.

'Not worth noticing,' he observed, as Smokey fell to the floor.

Titus was so busy gloating that he didn't see Omar creep up soundlessly behind him, a crowbar in his hand. Omar landed Titus a knock-out blow to the head and Jo watched numbly as Titus slumped to the ground. Brenda quickly and efficiently tied Titus up. She seemed to enjoy pulling the rope extra tight.

Omar and Brenda ran to unblock the store cupboard door. 'Where's Jo?' asked Ali.

'She was right here,' said Brenda. Ali pushed past her and ran to the door, with Lethe close behind. No-one noticed Smokey.

Jo was standing in the road. The hail was driving down. She looked at the two sisters. She looked at the leaden sky. She caught some hailstones in her hand. 'Hard rain,' she said. It was a challenge.

Lethe looked at Jo. She was baffled. Ali looked at Jo and a slow smile lit up her face. She began to hum a familiar tune.

Jo sang along with her mother – Bob Dylan's epic *Hard Rain's A-gonna Fall*. Fragments of lyrics came to her – a desolate wilderness where small children held guns and swords and wild wolves howled.

'I met a young girl,' sang Ali and Jo remembered the gift of a rainbow. And now they were in each other's arms, laughing and crying, but mostly crying.

'You knew me,' said Jo, wiping away her tears. 'Even looking like this, you knew me. She didn't recognise me.'

Lethe shrugged. 'Looking like that? I should think not.' She reached into her bag and produced a pistol. She laughed at the shock on their faces then fired the pistol into the air. 'Just a flare,' she said. 'So Sebastian will know where to find me.'

'Lady,' said Omar, patting his hand with the crowbar, 'You ain't going nowhere.'

Lethe laughed. The unmistakeable noise of a helicopter came nearer and nearer. Like a giant metal dragonfly, the forget-me-not blue machine hovered above them. A searchlight shone down on the small group of shivering people standing on the path. The wind from the rotor blades whipped their hair and clothes and the hail lashed their faces. 'Oh, but I am,' she said, and she watched as a rope ladder snaked down towards her.

Brenda and Omar barred Lethe's way. She turned to Lanying. Her eyes were glittering and calculating. 'Lotus, my dear,' she said. 'You were such a promising pupil – almost as gifted as Jocasta. I hope you girls will remember all I taught you.'

Lanying was furious. She didn't notice the consternation on the faces of the adults. 'On the contrary,' she said, her voice icy cold. 'The only thing we all want is to forget we ever laid eyes on you.'

Lethe smiled a triumphant smile. 'Your wish is my command,' she mocked, waving her hand imperiously. 'Thank you so much for asking.'

Everyone froze. No-one tried to stop her as she stepped onto the first rung of the ladder. Lethe laughed at their confused expressions as their memories swirled into the fog she created in their minds. She hardly noticed the wild-eyed, dishevelled, blood-stained boy dressed in grey who stumbled out of the building looking completely bewildered by the scene confronting him. 'Have you all gone mad?' demanded Smokey. 'Don't let her get away!'

Nobody moved – they just watched, transfixed, as Lethe climbed higher and higher. The wind was howling and the hail was turning to sleet.

And now, at last, Lethe was almost at the top of the ladder. And suddenly Smokey had Titus's gun in his hand and he was screaming above the noise of the helicopter and the wind. 'This is for my mother.' One shot. 'This is for my sister.' Another shot. 'And this is for me.'

The third shot reached its target. Lethe swayed on the ladder. For a moment it looked like she would fall but her arm became tangled in the ladder and she dangled lifelessly.

Jo looked up, her eyes wide with shock, as drops of blood sparkled like rubies and cascaded down. She raised her hand, half reaching for Lethe, half shielding her eyes from the glare of the searchlight. She watched as a single drop of blood ran down Lethe's limp arm, to her hand, then to her finger tip, where it hung, suspended for a moment, before falling, slowly, so slowly, through the blizzard, shining bright against the darkening sky. The drop landed on Jo's outstretched hand. She watched as the helicopter disappeared from view. The wind dropped and in the silence white snowflakes and red rain fell softly.

Jo's hand was throbbing. The cut on her palm was deep, and the shining drop of Lethe's blood had worked its way in.

Jo watched in horrified amazement as a bright light erupted from her wound, illuminating the faces of everyone there. The howl of the wind died away, and flurries of snowflakes hung in the air as time itself

stood still. Those who were bathed in the glowing light knew only comfort and warmth and peace.

Once again Jo held the lotus of light in her hands, only this time it was plain for all to see. One thousand petals shimmered softly, as flashes of rainbows gleamed from within. Jo breathed on it gently, as if it were a dandelion clock.

Everyone watched as the crystal flower dispersed into a myriad of glittering sparks – a healing dust that blew into the eyes and hearts of everyone in its path.

Particles of dust settled on Reg where he lay unconscious. He sat up slowly. A terrible throbbing in his head made him cry out, then mercifully the pain diminished and was gone. With a dazzling flash and a crashing silence reality was reasserted, and it was in that moment that their memories returned. Everyone looked around in bewilderment. Of Smokey and Titus there was no sign

As the after-image faded Lethe's voice echoed in Jo's mind. ***Jo, you have a brother. You have to find him. Find your brother.***

At Jo's feet two droplets of blood formed the shape of a heart, a crimson stain on the virgin snow.

A week later the Shamrat restaurant in Tottenham Lane was crowded with people who had known and loved Quinn. There was music and laughter as well as tears.

'Why here?' Jo asked her mother. They were sitting at a window table, watching Quinn's friends arrive.

'Quinn's favourite restaurant,' smiled Ali. 'Apparently he once met Bob Dylan here. Quinn was overjoyed. He never let you forget he'd shared a chicken Madras with his hero.' Ali listened as a new song started playing. 'This was our favourite,' she said. '*Forever Young*.' She looked away quickly.

Jo looked at her mother, wondering if this was a good time to ask about the brother Lethe had referred to. Ali's face was averted, but Jo could see her reflection in the window and her face was sad.

'Another time,' thought Jo. There were still so many unanswered questions.

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Epilogue

The old wooden barrel was bound top and bottom with metal bands. A hole had been punched in the side of the barrel, just under the word ESKI. Sticking into the hole was the end of a long black powder fuse covered with thin paper. The fuse snaked across the stone floor to the chamber halfway up an upright metal post. Inside the chamber the copper cartridge had a small hole in it and the fuse had been carefully pushed into the hole. Above the chamber a heavy weight was suspended on a mechanism attached to a trip wire. The other end of the trip wire encircled the ankle of the short, balding, heavy-set man, naked, bound and gagged, whose eyes were staring pools of horror in a face chalk-white with fear.

Titus Stigmurus was learning how to pray.

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.

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