

EMERALD  
GREEN





KERSTIN GIER

# EMERALD GREEN

*Translated from the German  
by Anthea Bell*



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Gwen and she holds suspicions about both Count Saint-Germain  
and Gideon, but as she uncovers the Circle’s secrets  
she finally learns her own destiny.

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*For all the girls in the world with marzipan hearts  
(and I mean all the girls, because it feels just the  
same whether you are fourteen or forty-one.)*

*Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops at all.*


—EMILY DICKINSON



# EMERALD GREEN







PROLOGUE

*Belgravia, London,*

*3 July 1912*

“THAT’S GOING to leave a nasty scar,” said the doctor, without looking up.

Paul managed a wry smile. “Well, better than the amputation Mrs. Worry-guts here was predicting, anyway.”

“Very funny!” Lucy snapped. “I am *not* a worry-guts, and as for *you* . . . Mr. Thoughtless Idiot, don’t go joking about it! You know how quickly wounds can get infected, and then you’d be lucky to survive at all at this date. No antibiotics, and all the doctors are ignorant and useless.”

“Thank you very much,” said the doctor, spreading a brownish paste on the wound he had just stitched up. It burned like hell, and Paul had difficulty in suppressing a grimace. He only hoped he hadn’t left bloodstains on Lady Tilney’s elegant chaise longue.

“Not that they can help it, of course.” Lucy was making an effort to sound friendlier. She even tried a smile.

Rather a grim smile, but it's the thought that counts. "I'm sure you're doing your best," she told the doctor.

"Dr. Harrison is the best," Lady Tilney assured her.

"And the only one available," murmured Paul. Suddenly he felt incredibly tired. There must have been a sedative in the sweetish stuff that the doctor had given him to drink.

"The most discreet, anyway," said Dr. Harrison. He put a snow-white bandage on Paul's arm. "And to be honest, I can't imagine that the treatment of cuts and stab wounds will be so very different in eighty years' time."

Lucy took a deep breath, and Paul guessed what was coming. A lock of hair had strayed from the ringlets pinned up on top of her head, and she put it back behind her ear with a look of spirited defiance. "Well, maybe not as a general rule, but if bacteria . . . er, those are single-celled organisms that—"

"Drop it, Luce!" Paul interrupted her. "Dr. Harrison knows perfectly well what bacteria are!" The wound was still burning horribly, and at the same time he felt so exhausted that he wanted to close his eyes and drift away into sleep. But that would only upset Lucy even more. Although her blue eyes were sparkling furiously, he knew her anger only hid her concern for him, and—even worse—her fears. For her sake, he mustn't show either his poor physical state or his own desperation. So he went on talking. "After all, we're not in the Middle Ages; we're in the twentieth century. It's a time of trailblazing medical advances. The first ECG device is already yesterday's

news, and for the last few years, they've known the cause of syphilis and how to cure it."

"Someone was paying attention like a good boy in his study of the mysteries!" Lucy looked as if she might explode any minute now. "How nice for you!"

Dr. Harrison made his own contribution. "And last year that Frenchwoman Marie Curie was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry."

"So what did she invent? The nuclear bomb?"

"Sometimes you're shockingly uneducated, Lucy. Marie Curie invented radio—"

"Oh, do *shut up!*" Lucy had crossed her arms and was staring angrily at Paul, ignoring Lady Tilney's reproachful glance. "You can keep your lectures to yourself right now! You! Could! Have! Been! Dead! So will you kindly tell me how I was supposed to avert the disaster ahead of us without you?" At this point, her voice shook. "Or how I could go on living without you at all?"

"I'm sorry, Princess." She had no idea just *how* sorry he was.

"Huh!" said Lucy. "You can leave out that remorseful doggy expression."

"There's no point in thinking about what *might* have happened, my dear child," said Lady Tilney, shaking her head as she helped Dr. Harrison to pack his instruments back in his medical bag. "It all turned out for the best. Paul was unlucky, but lucky as well."

"Well, yes, it could have ended much worse, but that doesn't mean it was all for the best!" cried Lucy. "Nothing

turned out for the best, nothing at all!" Her eyes filled with tears, and the sight almost broke Paul's heart. "We've been here for nearly three months, and we haven't done any of the things we planned to do, just the opposite—we've only made matters worse! We finally had those wretched papers in our hands, and then Paul simply gave them away!"

"Maybe I was a little too hasty." He let his head drop back on the pillow. "But at that moment, I felt it was the right thing to do." *Because at that moment, I felt horribly close to death.* Lord Alastair's sword could easily have finished him off. However, he mustn't let Lucy know that. "If we have Gideon on our side, there's still a chance. As soon as he's read those papers, he'll understand what we're doing and why." *Or let's hope so,* he thought.

"But we don't know exactly what's in the papers ourselves. They could all be in code, or . . . oh, you don't even know just what you handed to Gideon," said Lucy. "Lord Alastair could have palmed anything off on you—old bills, love letters, blank sheets of paper. . . ."

This idea had occurred to Paul himself some time ago, but what was done was done. "Sometimes you just have to trust things will be all right," he murmured, wishing that applied to himself. The thought that he might have handed Gideon a bundle of worthless documents was bad enough; even worse was the chance that the boy might take them straight off to Count Saint-Germain. That would mean they'd thrown away their only trump card. But Gideon had said he loved Gwyneth, and the way he said it had been . . . well, convincing.

“He promised me,” Paul tried to say, but it came out as an inaudible whisper. It would have been a lie, anyway. He hadn’t had time to hear Gideon’s answer.

“Trying to work with the Florentine Alliance was a stupid idea,” he heard Lucy say. His eyes had closed. Whatever Dr. Harrison had given him, it worked fast.

“And yes, I know, I know,” Lucy went on. “We ought to have dealt with the situation ourselves.”

“But you’re not murderers, my child,” said Lady Tilney.

“What’s the difference between committing a murder and getting someone else to do it?” Lucy heaved a deep sigh, and although Lady Tilney contradicted her vigorously (“My dear, don’t say such things! You didn’t ask anyone to commit murder, you only handed over a little information!”), she suddenly sounded inconsolable. “We’ve got everything wrong that we *could* get wrong, Paul. All we’ve done in three months is to waste any amount of time and Margaret’s money, and we’ve involved far too many other people.”

“It’s Lord Tilney’s money,” Lady Tilney corrected her, “and you’d be astonished to hear what he usually wastes it on. Horse races and dancing girls are the least of it. He won’t even notice the small sums I’ve abstracted for our own purposes. And if he ever does, I trust he’ll be enough of a gentleman to say nothing about it.”

“Speaking for myself, I can’t feel at all sorry to be involved,” Dr. Harrison assured them, smiling. “I’d just begun to find life rather boring. But it isn’t every day of the week you meet time travelers from the future who know your

own job better than you do. And between ourselves, the high-and-mighty manner of the de Villiers and Pinkerton-Smythe gentlemen among the Guardians here is quite enough to make anyone feel a little rebellious in secret.”

“How true,” said Lady Tilney. “That self-satisfied Jonathan de Villiers threatened to lock his wife in her room if she didn’t stop sympathizing with the suffragettes.” She imitated a grumpy male voice. “*What will it be next, I wonder? Votes for dogs?*”

“Ah, so that’s why you threatened to slap his face,” said Dr. Harrison. “Now that was one tea party when I was *not* bored!”

“It wasn’t quite like that. I only said I couldn’t guarantee what my right hand might not do next if he went on making such remarks.”

“‘If he went on talking such utter balderdash’ . . . those were your precise words,” Dr. Harrison set her right. “I remember because they impressed me deeply.”

Lady Tilney laughed, and offered the doctor her arm. “I’ll show you to the door, Dr. Harrison.”

Paul tried to open his eyes and sit up to thank the doctor. He didn’t manage to do either of those things. “Mmph . . . nks,” he mumbled with the last of his strength.

“What on earth was in that stuff you gave him, doctor?” Lucy called after Dr. Harrison.

He turned in the doorway. “Only a few drops of tincture of morphine. Perfectly harmless!”

But Paul was past hearing Lucy’s screech of outrage.



*As according to our Secret Service sources, London may expect air raids by German squadrons in the next few days, we have decided to proceed at once to Stage One of the security protocol. The chronograph will be deposited for an unknown period of time in the documents room, from which location Lady Tilney, my brother Jonathan, and I will elapse, thus limiting the time spent elapsing to three hours a day. Traveling to the nineteenth century from the documents room ought not to present any problems; there was seldom anyone there by night, and there is no mention in the Annals of visitors from the future, so it is to be presumed that our presence was never noticed.*

*As was to be expected, Lady Tilney objected to this departure from her usual routine, and according to herself “could see no kind of logic in our arguments,” but in the end, she had to accept the decision of our Grand Master. Times of war call for special measures.*

*Elapsing this afternoon to the year 1851 went surprisingly smoothly, perhaps because my dear wife had given us some of her wonderful teacakes to take with us and because, remembering heated debates on other occasions, we avoided such subjects as women’s suffrage. Lady Tilney greatly regretted being unable to visit the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, but as we shared her feelings in that respect, the conversation did not degenerate into argument. She did, however, give further evidence of her*

*eccentricity in proposing that from now on we should pass the time by playing poker.*

*Weather today: fine drizzling rain, temperature a springlike 50° Fahrenheit*

FROM *THE ANNALS OF THE GUARDIANS*

30 MARCH 1916

REPORT: TIMOTHY DE VILLIERS, INNER CIRCLE

*“Potius sero quam nunquam”* (Livy)



## ONE



THE END OF THE SWORD was pointing straight at my heart, and my murderer's eyes were like black holes threatening to swallow up everything that came too close to them. I knew I couldn't get away. With difficulty, I stumbled a few steps back.

The man followed me. "I will wipe that which is displeasing to God off the face of the earth!" he boomed. "The ground will soak up your blood!"

I had at least two smart retorts to these sinister words on the tip of my tongue. (Soak up my blood? Oh, come off it, this is a tiled floor.) But I was in such a panic that I couldn't get a word out. The man didn't look as if he'd appreciate my little joke at this moment anyway. In fact, he didn't look as if he had a sense of humor at all.

I took another step back and came up against a wall. The killer laughed out loud. Okay, so maybe he did have a sense of humor, but it wasn't much like mine.

“Die, demon!” he cried, plunging his sword into my breast without any more ado.

I woke up, screaming. I was wet with sweat, and my heart hurt as if a blade really had pierced it. What a horrible dream! But was that really surprising?

My experiences of yesterday (and the day before) weren’t exactly likely to make me nestle down comfortably in bed and sleep the sleep of the just. Unwanted thoughts were writhing around in my mind like flesh-eating plants gone crazy. *Gideon was only pretending*, I thought. *He doesn’t really love me.*

“He hardly has to do anything to attract girls,” I heard Count Saint-Germain saying in his soft, deep voice, again and again. And “Nothing is easier to calculate than the reactions of a woman in love.”

Oh, yes? So how does a woman in love react when she finds out that someone’s been lying to her and manipulating her? She spends hours on the phone to her best friend, that’s how, then she sits about in the dark, unable to get to sleep, asking herself why the hell she ever fell for the guy in the first place, crying her eyes out at the same time because she wants him so much . . . Right, so it doesn’t take a genius to calculate that.

The lighted numbers on the alarm clock beside my bed said 3:10, so I must have nodded off after all. I’d even slept for more than two hours. And someone—my mum?—must have come in to cover me up, because all I could remember was huddling on the bed with my arms around my knees, listening to my heart beating much too fast.

Odd that a broken heart can beat at all, come to think of it.

“It feels like it’s made of red splinters with sharp edges, and they’re slicing me up from inside so that I’ll bleed to death,” I’d said, trying to describe the state of my heart to Lesley (okay, so it sounds at least as corny as the stuff the character in my dream was saying, but sometimes the truth *is* corny). And Lesley had said sympathetically, “I know just how you feel. When Max dumped me, I thought at first I’d die of grief. Grief and multiple organ failure. Because there’s a grain of truth in all those things they say about love: it goes to your kidneys, it punches you in the stomach, it breaks your heart and . . . er . . . it scurries over your liver like a louse. But first, that will all pass off; second, it’s not as hopeless as it looks to you; and third, your heart isn’t made of glass.”

“Stone, not glass,” I corrected her, sobbing. “My heart is a gemstone, and Gideon’s broken it into thousands of pieces, just like in Aunt Maddy’s vision.”

“Sounds kind of cool—but no! Hearts are really made of very different stuff, you take my word for it.” Lesley cleared her throat, and her tone of voice got positively solemn, as if she were revealing the greatest secret in the history of the world. “Hearts are made of something much tougher. It’s unbreakable, and you can reshape it anytime you like. Hearts are made to a secret formula.”

More throat-clearing to heighten the suspense. I instinctively held my breath.

“They’re made of stuff like *marzipan!*” Lesley announced.

“Marzipan?” For a moment I stopped sobbing and grinned instead.

“That’s right, marzipan,” Lesley repeated in deadly earnest. “The best sort, with lots of real ground almonds in it.”

I almost giggled. But then I remembered that I was the unhappiest girl in the world. I sniffed, and said, “If that’s so, then Gideon has *bitten off* a piece of my heart! And he’s nibbled away the chocolate coating around it too! You ought to have seen the way he looked when—”

But before I could start crying all over again, Lesley sighed audibly.

“Gweny, I hate to say so, but all this miserable weeping and wailing does no one any good. You have to stop it!”

“I’m not doing it on purpose,” I told her. “It just keeps on breaking out of me. One moment I’m still the happiest girl in the world, and then he tells me he—”

“Okay, so Gideon behaved like a bastard,” Lesley interrupted me, “although it’s hard to understand why. I mean, *hello?* Why on earth would girls in love be easier to manipulate? I’d have thought it was just the opposite. Girls in love are like ticking time bombs. You never know what they’ll do next. Gideon and his male chauvinist friend the count have made a big mistake.”

“I really thought Gideon was in love with me. The idea that he was only pretending is so . . .” Mean? Cruel? No word seemed enough to describe my feelings properly.

“Oh, sweetie—look, in other circumstances, you could wallow in grief for weeks on end, but you can’t afford to do that right now. You need your energy for other things. Like surviving, for instance.” Lesley sounded unusually stern. “So kindly pull yourself together.”

“That’s what Xemerius said, too. Before he went off and left me all alone.”

“Your little invisible monster is right! You have to keep a cool head now and put all the facts together. Ugh, what was that? Hang on, I have to open a window. Bertie just did a disgusting fart. Bad dog! Now, where was I? Yes, that’s it, we have to find out what your grandfather hid in your house.” Lesley’s voice rose slightly. “I must admit Raphael has turned out pretty useful. He’s not as stupid as you might think.”

“As *you* might think, you mean.” Raphael was Gideon’s little brother, who had just started going to our school. He’d discovered that the riddle my grandfather had left behind was all about geographical coordinates. And they had led straight to our house. “I’d love to know how much Raphael has found out about the secrets of the Guardians and Gideon’s time traveling.”

“Could be more than we might assume,” said Lesley. “Anyway, he wasn’t swallowing my story when I told him the coordinates were only because puzzle games like this were the latest fad in London. But he was clever enough not to ask any more questions.” She paused for a moment. “He has rather attractive eyes.”

“Yup.” They really were attractive, which reminded me that Gideon’s eyes were exactly the same. Green and surrounded by thick, dark lashes.

“Not that that impresses me. Only making an observation.”

*I’ve fallen in love with you.* Gideon had sounded deadly serious when he said that, looking straight at me. And I’d stared back and believed every word of it! My tears started flowing again, and I could hardly hear what Lesley was saying.

“. . . but I hope it’s a long letter, or a kind of diary, with your grandfather explaining everything the rest of them won’t tell you and a bit more. Then we can finally stop groping around in the dark and make a proper plan. . . .”

Eyes like that shouldn’t be allowed. Or there ought to be a law saying boys with such gorgeous eyes had to wear sunglasses all the time. Unless they canceled out the eyes by having huge jug ears or something like that.

“Gweny? You’re not crying again, are you?” Now Lesley sounded just like Mrs. Counter, our geography teacher, when people told her they were afraid they’d forgotten to do their homework. “Sweetie, this won’t do! You must stop twisting the knife in your own heart with all this drama! We have to—”

“Keep a cool head. Yes, you’re right.” It cost me an effort, but I tried to put the thought of Gideon’s eyes out of my mind and inject a little confidence into my voice. I owed Lesley that. After all, she was the one who’d been propping me up for days. Before she rang off, I had to tell

her how glad I was that she was my friend. Even if it made me start to cry again, but this time because it made me so emotional!

“Same here,” Lesley assured me. “My life would be dead boring without you!”

When she ended the call, it was just before midnight, and I really had felt a little better for a few minutes. But now, at ten past three, I’d have loved to call her back and go over the whole thing again.

Not that I was naturally inclined to be such a Moaning Minnie. It’s just that this was the first time in my life I’d ever suffered from unrequited love. Real unrequited love, I mean. The sort that genuinely hurts. Everything else retreated into the background. Even survival didn’t seem to matter. Honestly, the thought of dying didn’t seem so bad at that moment. I wouldn’t be the first to die of a broken heart, after all—I’d be in good company. There was the Little Mermaid, Juliet, Pocahontas, the Lady of the Camelias, Madame Butterfly—and now me, Gwyneth Shepherd. The good part of it was that I could leave out anything dramatic with a knife, as suggested by Lesley’s remark, because the way I felt now, I must have caught TB ages ago, and dying of consumption is much the most picturesque way to go. I’d lie on my bed looking pale and beautiful like Snow White, with my hair spread out on the pillow. Gideon would kneel beside me, feeling bitterly sorry for what he had done when I breathed my last words.

But first I had to go to the toilet, urgently.

Peppermint tea with masses of lemon and sugar was a

cure for all ills in our family, and I must have drunk pints of it. Because when I came in yesterday evening, my mother had noticed right away that I wasn't feeling good. It wasn't difficult to spot that, because crying had made me look like an albino rabbit. And if I'd told her—*Xemerius* suggested—that I'd had to chop onions in the limousine on the way home from the Guardians' headquarters, she'd never have believed my story.

"Have those damn Guardians been doing something to you? What happened?" she had asked, managing to sound sympathetic and furiously angry at the same time. "I'll murder Falk if—"

"No one's done anything to me, Mum," I'd said quickly, to reassure her. "And nothing has happened."

"As if she was going to believe that! Why didn't you try the onion excuse? You never take my good advice." *Xemerius* had stamped his clawed feet on the floor. He was a small stone gargoyle demon with big ears, bat's wings, a scaly tail like a dragon, and two little horns on a catlike head. Unfortunately he wasn't half as cute as he looked, and no one except me could hear his outrageous remarks and answer him back. There were two odd things about me, by the way, and I just had to live with them. One was that I'd been able to see gargoyle demons and other ghosts and talk to them from early childhood. The other was even odder, and I hadn't known about it until under two weeks ago, when I found out that I was one of a strictly secret bunch of twelve time travelers, which meant going back to somewhere in the past for a couple of hours



every day. The curse of time travel—well, okay, so it was supposed to be a gift—ought to have affected my cousin Charlotte, who'd have been much better at it, but it turned out that I'd drawn the short straw. No reason why I should be surprised. I was always left holding the last card when we played Old Maid; if we cast lots in class to see who bought Mrs. Counter's Christmas gift, I always got the piece of paper with her name on it (and how do you decide what to give a geography teacher?); if I had tickets for a concert, you could bet I'd fall sick; and when I particularly wanted to look good, I got a zit on my forehead the size of a third eye. Some people may not understand right away how a zit is like time travel—they may even envy me and think time travel would be fun, but it isn't. It's a nuisance, nerve-racking and dangerous as well. Not forgetting that if I hadn't inherited that stupid gift I'd never have met Gideon and then my heart, whether or not it was made of marzipan, would still be just fine. Because that guy was another of the twelve time travelers. One of the few still alive. You couldn't meet the others except back in the past.

"You've been crying," my mother had said in a matter-of-fact way.

"There, you see?" Xemerius had said. "Now she's going to squeeze you like a lemon until the pips squeak. She won't let you out of her sight for a second, and we can wave good-bye to tonight's treasure hunt."

I'd made a face at him, to let him know that I didn't feel like treasure hunting tonight anymore. Well, you have to make faces at invisible friends if you don't want

other people to think you're crazy because you talk to the empty air.

"Tell her you were trying out the pepper spray," the empty air had answered me back, "and it got into your own eyes by mistake."

But I'd been far too tired to tell lies. I just looked at my mum with red-rimmed eyes and tried telling the truth. *Here goes, then*, I'd thought. "It's just . . . no, I don't feel too good. It's . . . kind of a girl thing, you know?"

"Oh, darling."

"If I phone Lesley, I know I'll feel better."

Much to the surprise of Xemerius—me too—Mum had been satisfied with this explanation. She made me peppermint tea, left the teapot and my favorite cup with its pattern of spots on my bedside table, stroked my hair, and otherwise left me in peace. She didn't even keep reminding me of the time, as usual. ("Gwyneth! It's after ten, and you've been on the phone for forty minutes. You'll be seeing each other at school tomorrow.") Sometimes she really was the best mother in the world.

Sighing, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and stumbled off to the bathroom. I felt a cold breath of air.

"Xemerius? Are you there?" I asked under my breath, and felt for the light switch.

"That depends." Xemerius was dangling head down from the ceiling fixture in the corridor, blinking at the light. "I'm here so long as you don't turn back into a watering can." He raised his voice to a shrill, tearful pitch as he imitated me—rather well, I'm sorry to say. *And then he*

said, *I have no idea what you're talking about, and then I said, yes or no, and then he said, yes, but do stop crying. . . .*” He sighed theatrically. “Girls get on my nerves worse than any other kind of human being. Along with retired taxmen, saleswomen in hosiery departments, and presidents of community garden societies.”

“I can’t guarantee anything,” I whispered, so as not to wake the rest of my family up. “We’d better not mention You Know Who, or the indoor fountain will come back on again.”

“I was sick of the sound of his name anyway. Can we do something sensible for a change? Go treasure hunting, for instance?”

Getting some sleep might have been sensible, but unfortunately I was wide awake now. “Okay, we can start if you like. But first I have to get rid of all that tea.”

“What?”

I pointed to the bathroom door.

“Oh, I see,” said Xemerius. “I’ll just wait here.”

I looked better than I expected in the bathroom mirror. Unfortunately there wasn’t a sign of galloping consumption. My eyelids were a little swollen—that was all, as if I’d been using pink eye shadow and put on too much.

“Where were you all this time, Xemerius?” I asked when I came out into the corridor again. “Not by any chance with . . . ?”

“With whom?” Xemerius looked indignant. “Are you asking me about the person whose name we don’t mention?”

“Well, yes.” I would have loved to know what Gideon did yesterday evening. How was the wound in his arm healing up? And had he maybe said something to anyone about me? Like *It’s all a terrible misunderstanding. Of course I love Gwyneth. I wasn’t pretending at all when I told her so.*

“Oh, no you don’t! I’m not falling for that one.” Xemerius spread his wings and flew down to the floor. When he was sitting there in front of me, he hardly came above my knee. “But I didn’t go out. I was having a good look around this house. If anyone can find that treasure, then I can. If only because none of the rest of you can walk through walls. Or rummage around in your grandmother’s chest of drawers without being caught at it.”

“Yes, there must be some advantages to being invisible,” I said. I didn’t point out that Xemerius couldn’t rummage around in anything because his ghostly claws couldn’t even open a drawer. No ghost I’d ever met could move objects. Most of them, unlike Xemerius, couldn’t even manage a breath of cold air. “But you know we’re not looking for a treasure, only something left by my grandfather that will help us to find out more.”

“This house is full of stuff that might be treasure. Not to mention all the possible hiding places for it,” Xemerius went on, taking no notice of me. “Some of the walls on the first floor are double, with passages in between them—passages so narrow you can tell they’re not built for people with big bums.”

“Really?” I’d never discovered those passages myself. “How do you get into them?”

“The doors are covered up with wallpaper in most of the rooms, but there’s still a way in through your great-aunt’s wardrobe and another behind that big, solid sideboard in the dining room. And one in the library, hidden behind a swiveling bookcase. Oh, and there’s a link between the library and the stairwell leading to Mr. Bernard’s rooms, and another going up to the second floor.”

“Which would explain why Mr. Bernard always seems to appear out of nowhere,” I murmured.

“And that’s not all. There’s a ladder inside the big chimney shaft on the wall next to number 83 next door. You can climb it all the way up to the roof. You can’t get into the shaft from the kitchen anymore, because the old fireplace there has been bricked up, but there’s a way in with a flap over it at the back of the built-in cupboard at the end of the first-floor corridor, big enough to let Santa Claus through—or your weirdo of a butler.”

“Or the chimney sweep.”

“And then there’s the cellar!” Xemerius acted as if he hadn’t heard my down-to-earth remark. “Do your neighbors know this house has a secret, and there’s a second cellar underneath the cellar that everyone knows about? Although if you go looking for anything there, you’d better not be scared of spiders.”

“Then we’d better look somewhere else first,” I said, quite forgetting to whisper.

“If we knew what we’re looking for, of course it would be easier.” Xemerius scratched his chin with one of his back paws. “I mean, basically it could be anything: the stuffed

crocodile in the recess, the bottle of Scotch behind the books in the library, the bundle of letters in the secret drawer of your great-aunt's desk, the little chest in a hollow place in the brickwork—”

“A chest in the brickwork?” I interrupted him. And what recess was he talking about?

Xemerius nodded. “Oh, dear, I think you've woken your brother up.”

I spun round. My twelve-year-old brother, Nick, was standing in the doorway of his room, running both hands through his untidy red hair. “Who are you talking to, Gwenny?”

“It's the middle of the night,” I whispered. “Go back to bed, Nick.”

Nick looked at me undecidedly, and I could see him waking up more and more every second. “What was all that about a chest in the brickwork?”

“I . . . I was going to look for it, but I think I'd better wait until it's light.”

“Nonsense,” said Xemerius. “I can see in the dark like a . . . well, let's say an owl. And you can't very well search the house when everyone's awake. Not unless you want even more company.”

“I can bring my flashlight,” said Nick. “What's in the chest?”

“I don't know exactly.” I thought for a moment. “It could be something left there by Grandpa.”

“Oh,” said Nick, interested. “And whereabouts is this chest hidden?”

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I looked inquiringly at Xemerius.

“I saw it to one side of the secret passage behind that fat man with whiskers, the one sitting on his horse,” said Xemerius. “But who goes hiding secrets—I mean treasures—in a boring old chest? I think the crocodile is much more promising. Who knows what it’s stuffed with? I’m in favor of slitting it open.”

I wasn’t. I had an idea I’d met that crocodile before. “Let’s look in the chest first. A hollow place doesn’t sound bad.”

“Boring, boring, boring!” repeated Xemerius. “One of your ancestors probably hid his tobacco from his wife in it . . . or . . .” Obviously he had just had an idea he liked, because now he suddenly grinned. “Or the chopped-up body of a maid who stepped off the straight and narrow and went astray!”

“The chest is in the secret passage behind the picture of Great-great-great-great-great-uncle Hugh,” I explained to Nick. “But—”

“I’ll just get that flashlight!” My brother had already turned back to his room.

I sighed.

“Why are you sighing again?” Xemerius rolled his eyes. “It can’t hurt if your brother comes along.” He spread his wings. “I’ll just do a round of the house and make sure the rest of the family are fast asleep. We don’t want that sharp-nosed aunt of yours catching us when we find the diamonds.”

“What diamonds?”

“Think positive for once!” Xemerius was already hovering in the air. “Which would you rather, diamonds or the remains of a murdered maidservant? It’s all a question of attitude. We’ll meet in front of your fat uncle on his horse.”

“Are you talking to a ghost?” Nick had reappeared behind me. He switched off the ceiling light in the corridor and put his flashlight on instead.

I nodded. Nick had never doubted that I really could see ghosts—quite the opposite. Even when he was only four and I was eight, he used to stand up for me if people didn’t believe it. Aunt Glenda, for instance. We always quarreled when she went to Harrods with us and I talked to the nice uniformed doorman Mr. Grizzle. Mr. Grizzle had been dead for fifty years, so of course people wondered why I stopped and started talking about the Royal Family (Mr. Grizzle was a great admirer of the Queen) and the unseasonably wet June we were having (the weather was Mr. Grizzle’s second favorite subject of conversation). A lot of passersby laughed, some said children had such wonderful imaginations (ruffling up my hair to emphasize their point), and many others shook their heads, but no one got as worked up as Aunt Glenda. She used to look terribly embarrassed and haul me on after her, scolding if I braced my feet and stood my ground. She said I ought to follow Charlotte’s example (even then, Charlotte was so perfect that she never lost a barrette out of her hair), and worst of all, she threatened me with getting no dessert that evening. But although she carried out her threat (and



I loved all desserts, even stewed plums), I simply couldn't bring myself to walk past Mr. Grizzle without a word. Nick always tried to help by begging Aunt Glenda to let go of me because there was no one else for poor Mr. Grizzle to talk to, and Aunt Glenda cleverly got the better of him by saying, in sugary sweet tones, "Oh, little Nick, when will you understand that your sister is just trying to attract attention? There are no such things as ghosts. Do *you* see a ghost here?"

Nick always had to shake his head sadly and then Aunt Glenda would smile triumphantly. On the day when she decided never to take us to Harrods with her again, Nick had surprised me by changing his tactics. Tiny and plump-cheeked at the time—he was such a cute little boy, with an adorable lisp—he had stopped right in front of Aunt Glenda and asked, "Do you know what Mr. Grizzle said to me, Aunt Glenda? He said you're a nasty frowsty old witch!" Of course Mr. Grizzle would never have said such a thing, he was much too polite, and Aunt Glenda was too good a customer, but my mum *had* said something rather like it the evening before. Aunt Glenda pressed her lips together and stalked on, holding Charlotte's hand. Back home there had been an unpleasant scene with my mother, who was cross because we'd had to find our way home on our own, and Aunt Glenda had said in icy tones that Mum was responsible for the frowsty witch remark, and the upshot was that we weren't allowed to go shopping with Aunt Glenda ever again. But even now we liked saying "frowsty."

When I got older, I stopped telling people I could see things that they couldn't. That's best if you don't want to be thought crazy. But I never had to pretend to Nick, Caroline, and Lesley, because they believed in my ghosts. I wasn't quite sure about Mum and Great-aunt Maddy, but at least they never laughed at me. Aunt Maddy had strange visions herself at irregular intervals, so she probably knew just how it felt when no one believed you.

"Is he nice?" whispered Nick. The beam of his flashlight danced over the stairs.

"Who?"

"Your ghost, of course."

"It all depends," I said truthfully.

"What does he look like?"

"He's rather cute. But he thinks he's dangerous." As we went down on tiptoe to the second floor, which was occupied by Aunt Glenda and Charlotte, I tried describing Xemerius as well as I could.

"Cool," whispered Nick. "An invisible pet! I wish I had one!"

"Pet! Don't you ever say that when Xemerius is within earshot!" I half hoped to hear my cousin snoring through her bedroom door, but of course Charlotte didn't snore. People who are perfect don't make nasty, frowsty noises in their sleep.

Halfway down to the next floor, my little brother yawned, and I instantly felt guilty. "Listen, Nick, it's three thirty in the morning, and you have to go to school later. Mum will murder me if she finds out I've kept you awake."

"I'm not a bit tired! And it would be mean of you to leave me out now! What did Grandfather hide in the chest?"

"I've no idea. Maybe a book explaining everything to me. Or at least a letter. Grandpa was Grand Master of the Lodge and its Guardians. He knew all about me and this time-travel stuff, and by the time he died, he knew it wasn't Charlotte who inherited the gene. Because I met him in the past, in person, and explained it all to him."

"You're so lucky," whispered Nick, adding almost as if ashamed of himself, "To be honest, I can hardly remember him. But he was always good-tempered and not a bit strict, just the opposite of Lady Arista. And he used to smell of caramel and something herby."

"That was the tobacco he smoked in his pipe—careful!" I stopped Nick just in time. By now we were past the second floor, but there were a few tricky steps on the stairs down to the first floor that creaked badly. Years of sneaking down to the kitchen by night had taught me to avoid them. We carefully walked around the creaking places, and finally reached Great-great-great-great-great-uncle Hugh's portrait.

"Okay. Here we are."

Nick shone his flashlight on our ancestor's face. "It was mean of him to call his horse Fat Annie! She's lovely and slender—he's the one who looks like a fat pig with whiskers."

"I agree with you." I was feeling behind the picture frame for the bolt that started the mechanism to open the secret door. As usual, it stuck a bit.

“All sleeping like babies.” Xemerius landed on the stairs beside us, puffing. “That’s to say, all but Mr. Bernard. He obviously suffers from insomnia, but don’t worry. He’s eating a plate of cold chicken in the kitchen and watching a Clint Eastwood film.”

“Good.” The picture swung out with its usual squealing sound, showing a few steps fitted between the walls. They ended only about six or seven feet away in front of another door. This door led into the first-floor bathroom, and it was hidden on the bathroom side by a floor-length mirror. We often used to come through it for fun—we got our kicks by not knowing if there’d be anyone in there using the bathroom—but we hadn’t yet found out what the point of this secret passage was. Maybe one of our ancestors had just thought it would be nice to be able to get away to this quiet place whenever he liked.

“So where’s the chest, Xemerius?” I asked.

“On the left. Between the wallsh.” I couldn’t make him out clearly in the dim light, but it sounded as if he was picking something out of his teeth.

“Xemerius is a bit of a tongue-twister,” said Nick. “I’d call him Xemi. Or Merry. Can I go in and get the chest?”

“It’s on the left,” I said.

“Tongue-twisher yourshelf,” said Xemerius. “*Shemi* or *Merry*—no way! I come from a long line of mighty ansheshtral demonsh, and our namesh—”

“Have you got something in your mouth?”

Xemerius spat and smacked his lips. “Not now. I ate the pigeon I found asleep on the roof. Stupid feathers.”

“But you can’t eat at all!”

“No idea of anything, but always giving us the benefit of her opinion!” said Xemerius, offended. “Won’t even let me eat a little pigeon!”

“You can’t eat a pigeon,” I repeated. “You’re a ghost.”

“I’m a *demon*! I can eat anything I like! I once ate a whole priest. Vestments and all. Why are you looking at me so incredulously?”

“Why don’t you keep your eyes open for anyone coming?”

“Hey, don’t you believe me?”

Nick had already climbed down the steps into the bathroom and was shining his flashlight along the wall. “I can’t see anything.”

“The chest is behind the brickwork, like I said. In a hollow space, bonehead,” said Xemerius. “And I’m not lying. If I say I ate a pigeon, then I did eat a pigeon.”

“It’s in a hollow space behind the brickwork,” I told Nick.

“But I can’t see a loose brick anywhere.” My little brother knelt down on the floor and pressed his hands against the wall, testing it out.

“Hello-o-o, I’m speaking to you!” said Xemerius. “Are you ignoring me, crybaby?” When I didn’t reply, he said, “Well, okay, so it was the *ghost* of a pigeon. Comes to the same thing.”

“Ghost of a pigeon—are you trying to be funny? Even if pigeons did have ghosts—and I’ve never seen one—you still couldn’t eat them. Ghosts can’t kill one another.”

“These bricks are all solid as rocks,” said Nick.

Xemerius snorted angrily. “First, even pigeons can sometimes decide to stay on the earth and haunt it, don’t ask me why. Maybe they have unfinished business with a cat somewhere. Second, kindly tell me how you can tell a ghost pigeon from all the other pigeons. And third, their ghostly life is over if I eat them. Because as I’ve told you I don’t know how often, I’m no ordinary ghost. I’m a *demon*! Maybe I can’t do much in your world, but I’m big news in the world of ghosts. When will you finally get the hang of that?”

Nick stood up again and kicked the wall a couple of times. “Nope, nothing we can do about it.”

“Ssh! Stop that, it makes too much noise.” I put my head into the bathroom and looked at Xemerius reproachfully. “So you’re big news. Great. Now what?”

“How do you mean? I never said a word about loose bricks.”

“Then how are we to get at the chest?”

“With a hammer and chisel.” That was a very helpful answer, only it wasn’t Xemerius who gave it, but Mr. Bernard. I froze with horror. There he stood, only a couple of feet above me on the steps. I could see his gold-rimmed glasses sparkling in the dark. And his teeth. Could he be smiling?

“Oh, shit!” Xemerius was so upset that he spat out water on the carpet over the steps. “He must have inhaled the cold chicken to get it inside him so fast. Or else the film was no good. You can’t rely on Clint Eastwood these days.”

Unfortunately I was unable to say anything but “Wh-what?”

“A hammer and chisel would be the best solution,” repeated Mr. Bernard calmly. “But I suggest you put it off until later. If only so as not to disturb the rest of the family when you take the chest out of its hiding place. Ah, I see Master Nick is here too.” He looked into the beam of Nick’s flashlight without blinking. “Barefoot! You’ll both catch your death of cold.” He himself was wearing slippers and an elegant dressing gown with an embroidered monogram, WB. (Walter? William? Wilfred?) I’d always thought of Mr. Bernard as a man without any first name.

“How do you know it’s a chest we’re looking for?” asked Nick. His voice didn’t tremble, but I could tell from his wide eyes that he was as startled and baffled as I was.

Mr. Bernard straightened his glasses. “I expect because I walled up that—er—that chest in there myself. It’s a kind of wooden box decorated with valuable inlaid intarsia work, an antique from the early eighteenth century that belonged to your grandfather.”

“And what’s in it?” I asked, finding that I could speak again at last.

Mr. Bernard looked at me with reproof in his eyes. “Naturally it was not for me to ask that question. I simply hid the chest here on behalf of your grandfather.”

“He can’t try telling me that,” said Xemerius grumpily. “Not when he goes around poking his nose into everything else. And slinking along here after lulling a person into a false sense of security with cold chicken. But it’s all

your fault, you silly watering can! If you had believed me, the senile old sleepwalker could never have taken us by surprise!”

“I will of course be happy to help you to extricate the chest again,” Mr. Bernard went on. “But preferably this evening, when your grandmother and aunt will be on their way to the meeting of the ladies of the Rotary Club. So I suggest that we all go back to bed now. After all, you two have to go to school later.”

“Yes, and meanwhile he’ll hack the thing out of the wall himself,” said Xemerius. “Then he can get his hands on the diamonds and leave a few withered old walnuts for us to find. I know his sort.”

“Don’t be daft,” I muttered. If Mr. Bernard had wanted to do anything like that, he could have done it long ago, because no one else knew a thing about that chest. What on earth could be in it for Grandpa to have wanted it bricked up inside his own house?

“Why do you want to help us?” asked Nick bluntly, getting in ahead of me with that question.

“Because I’m good with a hammer and chisel,” said Mr. Bernard. And he added, even more quietly, “And because your grandfather, unfortunately, can’t be here to help Miss Gwyneth.”

Suddenly I felt it hard to breathe again, and I had to fight back tears. “Thanks,” I murmured.

“Don’t get hopeful too soon. I’m afraid that the key to the chest has . . . has been lost. And I really don’t know



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that I can bring myself to take a sledgehammer to such a beautiful and valuable antique,” said Mr. Bernard, sighing.

“Meaning you’re not going to tell our mum and Lady Arista anything?” asked Nick.

“Not if you go to bed now.” I saw Mr. Bernard’s teeth flash in the darkness again before he turned and went back up the steps. “Good night, and try to get some sleep.”

“Good night, Mr. Bernard,” Nick and I murmured.

“The old villain!” said Xemerius. “He needn’t think I’m letting him out of my sight.”



*The Circle of Blood its perfection will find,  
The philosopher's stone shall eternity bind.  
New strength will arise in the young at that hour,  
Making one man immortal, for he holds the power.*

*But beware: when the twelfth star shows its own force,  
His life here on earth runs its natural course.  
And if youth is destroyed, then the oak tree will stand  
To the end of all time, rooted fast in the land.*

*As the star dies, the eagle arises supreme,  
Fulfilling his ancient and magical dream.  
For a star goes out in the sky above,  
If it freely chooses to die for love.*

FROM THE SECRET WRITINGS OF COUNT SAINT-GERMAIN

## TWO



“WELL?” CYNTHIA DALE, who was in our class at school, had planted herself in front of us with her hands on her hips, elbows pointing out, thus barring our way up to the first floor. Other students, who had to push past to the right or left of us, were complaining of the traffic jam. Cynthia was twisting the ugly tie that was part of the St. Lennox High School uniform in her fingers, and she had a stern expression on her face. “What are your costumes going to be like?” It would be her birthday at the weekend, and she’d asked us to the costume party she gave every year.

She was getting on our nerves. Lesley shook her head. “Did you know you’re nuttier all the time these days, Cyn? I mean, you were nuts to begin with, but it’s been getting worse and worse. People don’t go about asking their guests what they’re wearing to a costume party!”

“Exactly. Unless you want to have a party all on your

own,” I said, trying to squeeze past Cynthia to one side. But her hand came out, quick as lightning, and grabbed my arm.

“I think up such fascinating themes for my costume parties, but there are always spoilsports who don’t stick to the rules,” she said. “Remember the Carnival of Animals party, and some people turned up with a feather in their hair and said they were in chicken costume? Yes, you may well look guilty, Gwenny! I know just whose idea that was.”

“Not everyone has a mum whose hobby is making papier mâché elephant masks,” said Lesley. Feeling cross, I just muttered, “Let us by!” I didn’t bother to say how little Cynthia’s party mattered to me right now, but I expect anyone could see that from my face anyway.

The grip on my arm only tightened. “And then there was Barbie’s Beach Party.” An obvious shudder ran down Cynthia’s spine at the thought of that one—for very good reasons, by the way. She took a deep breath. “This time I want to make sure. ‘Greensleeves Was My Delight’ is a wonderful theme, and I’m not having anyone spoil the party this time. Just so as you know, green nail varnish or a green scarf won’t do.”

“Would you let me pass if I gave you a black eye?” I snapped. “It’s sure to be fading to green by the time you throw your party.”

Cynthia made out she hadn’t heard me. “I’m coming as a flower girl in a green dress with a basket full of green posies. Sarah is coming as a green pepper. She says her

costume is brilliant, but I don't know any more about it yet, because she suddenly had to go to the toilet. Gordon is coming as a field of daisies. He'll be in artificial turf all over."

"Cyn . . ." There was just no getting past her.

"And Charlotte is having a costume specially made by a dressmaker, but it's still a secret. Isn't that right, Charlotte?"

My cousin Charlotte, jammed in between a lot of other students, tried to stop, but she had to go with the flow climbing up the stairs. "It's not all that difficult to guess," she told us in passing. "I'll just say tulle in seven different shades of green. And it looks like I'll be coming with King Oberon." She called that last remark back over her shoulder. And she was looking at me with a funny sort of smile, the same as at breakfast, when I'd felt like throwing a tomato at her.

"Good for Charlotte," said Cynthia, pleased. "Coming in green *and* bringing a boy. That's the kind of guest I like."

Surely the boy Charlotte was bringing wouldn't be . . . no, impossible. Gideon would never stick on pointy ears. Or would he? I watched Charlotte moving through the crowd like a queen. She had done her glossy red hair in a kind of braided retro style, and the girls from the younger classes were all looking at her with that mixture of dislike and admiration that comes only from genuine envy. There'd probably be cute braided hairstyles all over the school yard tomorrow.

“So what are you two coming as, and who are you bringing?” asked Cynthia.

“We’re coming as little green men from Mars, O best party hostess of all time,” said Lesley, with a sigh of resignation. “And you’ll have to wait and see who we’re bringing. It’s a surprise.”

“Okay, then.” Cynthia let go of my arm. “Little green men from Mars. Not exactly attractive, but original. Don’t you dare change your minds.” Without saying good-bye, she homed in on her next victim. “Katie! Hi! Stop right there. About my party!”

“Little green men from Mars?” I repeated as I looked automatically at the niche where James, the school ghost, usually stood. This morning it was empty.

“We had to shake her off somehow or other,” said Lesley. “Her party! Who wants to bother with that kind of thing?”

“Did I hear something about a party? I’ll be there!” Gideon’s brother Raphael had emerged behind us, and made his way in between us with a confident look, taking my arm and putting his other arm around Lesley’s waist. He’d done his tie up in a very peculiar way. Well, strictly speaking, he’d just tied a double knot in it. “And there was I thinking you Brits don’t have much to celebrate! Closing time in the pubs and all that.”

Lesley shook free of him. “I’m afraid I’ll have to disappoint you. Cynthia’s annual costume party isn’t the sort of party you’d enjoy. Unless you like the kind where parents keep a beady eye on the buffet to make sure no one

mixes anything alcoholic into the drinks or tips over the dessert.”

“Yes, Cynthia’s mum and dad do that, but they always try playing funny games with us,” I defended them. “And they’re usually the only ones who dance.” I glanced at Raphael sideways, and quickly looked away again because his profile was so like his brother’s. “To be honest, I’m surprised Cyn hasn’t invited you yet.”

“She did.” Raphael sighed. “I said I was afraid I had another engagement. I hate themed parties where you have to dress up. But if I’d known you two were going . . .”

I was about to offer to tie his tie properly for him (the school rules were pretty strict about that), when he put his arm around Lesley’s waist again and said cheerfully, “Did you tell Gwyneth that we tracked down the location of the treasure in your mystery game? Has she found it yet?”

“Yes,” said Lesley briefly. I noticed that she didn’t shake herself free this time.

“So how’s the game getting along, *mignonne*?”

“It’s not really a—” I began, but Lesley interrupted me.

“I’m sorry, Raphael, but you can’t play anymore,” she said coolly.

“What? Oh, come on, I don’t think that’s fair!”

I didn’t think it was fair, either. After all, we weren’t playing a game for poor Raphael to be kept out of, and he’d been a help so far. “Lesley only means that—”

Lesley interrupted me again. “Life isn’t fair,” she said, if possible even more coolly. “You have your brother to thank for that. As I’m sure you know, we’re on different

sides in what you call the *game*. And we can't risk you passing on information to Gideon. Who, by the way, is an absolute bas—not a particularly pleasant person.”

“Lesley!” Was she out of her mind?

“*What?* This treasure hunt has something to do with my brother and the time-traveling business?” Raphael had let go of Lesley and was standing there as if rooted to the ground. “So what’s he supposed to have done to you two?”

“Don’t act so surprised!” said Lesley. “I’m sure you and Gideon talk everything over together.” She winked at me, but I could only stare back, baffled.

“No, we don’t!” cried Raphael. “We spend hardly any time together. Gideon is always off somewhere on secret missions. And if he does happen to be at home, he’s brooding over mysterious documents or staring into the depths of space. Or, even worse, Charlotte turns up and gets on my nerves.” He looked so unhappy that I’d have liked to put my arms around him, particularly when he added quietly, “I thought we were friends. Yesterday afternoon I felt sure we were going to get on really well together.”

Lesley—or perhaps I’d better call her my friend the fridge—just shrugged her shoulders. “Yes, yesterday was nice. But let’s be honest. We hardly know each other at all. You can’t talk about friendship right away.”

“So you were only making use of me to find out those coordinates,” said Raphael, looking hard at Lesley, probably hoping she’d contradict him.

“Like I said, life isn’t always fair.” That was obviously



the end of it so far as Lesley was concerned. She made me walk on. “Gwen, we have to hurry,” she said. “Mrs. Counter’s handing out the essay subjects today. And I don’t want to be landed with research into the extent of the eastern delta of the river Ganges.”

I glanced back at Raphael, who was looking rather stunned. He tried to put his hands in his trouser pockets, only to find out that there weren’t any in the school uniform.

“Oh, Lesley, do look at him!” I said.

“Or into ethnic groups with names I can’t pronounce!”

I grabbed her arm the way Cynthia had grabbed mine just now. “What’s the matter?” I whispered. “A proper little ray of sunshine, aren’t you? Why do you have to go for Raphael like that? Is this part of some plan that I don’t know about?”

“I’m only keeping on the safe side.” Lesley looked past me at the bulletin board. “Oh, great! There’s a new ad up on it—jewelry design! Speaking of jewelry,” she added, fishing inside the neck of her blouse and bringing out a little chain, “look at this! I’m wearing that key you brought back from your travels in time as a pendant. Isn’t that cool? I tell everyone it’s the key to my heart.”

Her diversionary tactics cut no ice with me. “Lesley, Raphael can’t help it if his brother is a bastard. And I believe him when he says he doesn’t know any of Gideon’s secrets. He’s new to this country and this school, and he doesn’t know anyone yet.”

“He’s sure to find plenty of people who’ll enjoy taking

care of him.” Lesley went on staring straight ahead. The freckles on her nose danced in the sunlight. “You wait and see. This time tomorrow, he’ll have forgotten all about me, and he’ll be calling some other girl *mignonne*.”

“Yes, but . . .” Only when I spotted the give-away blush on Lesley’s face did light dawn on me. “Oh, now I get it! Giving his brother the cold shoulder has nothing to do with Gideon! You’re just shit-scared of falling in love with Raphael!”

“Nonsense. Anyway, he’s not my type!”

Aha. That said it all. Well, I was Lesley’s best friend, I’d known her forever, and that reply wouldn’t have thrown anyone off the right track, even Cynthia.

“Come off it, Lesley. Who’s going to believe that?”

Lesley finally looked away from the announcements on the bulletin board and gave me a grin. “So what? We can’t both afford to be suffering from hormonal softening of the brain at this particular moment, can we? It’s quite enough for one of us not to be responsible for her actions.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“But it’s true! You think of nothing but Gideon, so you simply don’t see how serious the situation is. You need someone who can think straight, like me. And I’m not about to be taken in by that Frenchman.”

“Oh, Lesley!” I gave her a big hug. No one, *no one* else in the world had such a wonderful, crazy, clever friend as I did. “But it would be terrible if you had to give up your chance of being lucky in love because of me.”

“There you go, exaggerating again.” Lesley lowered her voice and breathed into my ear, “If he’s anything like his brother, he’d have broken my heart after a week at the latest.”

“So?” I said, giving her a little tap on the hand. “It’s made of marzipan, so you can reshape it anytime you like!”

“Don’t laugh at me. All that about marzipan hearts is a metaphor, and I’m really proud of it.”

“Of course. One day you’ll be quoted all over the world. ‘Hearts can’t be broken because they’re made of marzipan.’ From *The Wit and Wisdom of Lesley Hay*.”

“Wrong, I’m afraid,” said a voice beside us. It belonged to our English teacher, Mr. Whitman, who was much too good-looking for a teacher.

I’d have liked to ask what he thought he knew about female hearts, but it was better not to answer Mr. Whitman back. Like Mrs. Counter, he was apt to hand out extra homework on way-out subjects, and casual as he might seem, he could be very strict.

“Wrong about what?” asked Lesley, throwing caution to the winds.

He looked at us, shaking his head. “I thought we’d gone over the difference between metaphors, similes, symbols, and images quite sufficiently. You can call it a metaphor to speak of broken hearts, but how do you classify marzipan?”

Who on earth was interested? And since when did classes begin out in the corridor? “A symbol . . . er . . . a simile?” I asked hopefully.

Mr. Whitman nodded. "Yes, although not a very good one," he said, laughing. Then he turned serious again. "You look tired, Gwyneth. You've been lying awake all night brooding, at odds with the world, am I right?"

So what business of his was it? And I could do without his sympathetic tone of voice too.

He sighed. "All this is rather too much for you." He was fidgeting with the signet ring that he wore as one of the Guardians. "That was only to be expected. Maybe Dr. White could prescribe you something to help you at least to sleep at night." I cast him an indignant glance, whereupon he gave me an encouraging smile before he turned and went into the classroom ahead of us.

"Did I fail to hear properly, or did Mr. Whitman just suggest giving me sleeping pills?" I asked Lesley. "Right after letting me know I looked terrible, I think."

"Just like him!" snorted Lesley. "He wants you to be a puppet of the Guardians all day and then drugged out of your mind at night so as to keep you from getting any ideas of your own. Well, he's not fooling us." She energetically brushed a lock of hair back from her face. "We're going to show those Guardians that they underestimate you."

"Hm," I said doubtfully, but Lesley was looking at me with grim determination.

"We'll draw up our master plan at first break in the girls' toilets."

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## EMERALD GREEN

ANYWAY, MR. WHITMAN was wrong. I didn't look tired (I'd checked in the mirror in the girls' toilets several times), and oddly enough, I didn't feel tired, either. After our nocturnal treasure hunt, I'd soon fallen asleep again, and this time the nightmares stayed away. It could be I'd even had a nice dream, because in those magic seconds between sleeping and waking, I'd felt confident and hopeful. Although it's true that when I was fully awake the gloomy realities came back into my mind, first and foremost: *Gideon was only pretending to love me.*

However, a little of that hopeful mood had lasted into daytime. Maybe that was because I'd finally had a few hours' uninterrupted sleep. Or possibly it had occurred to me, even in my dreams, that galloping consumption could be cured these days. Then again, it could just be that my tear ducts were empty.

"Do you think it's possible that maybe Gideon set out to make me fall in love with him, but then he really did fall in love with me himself, kind of by mistake?" I cautiously asked Lesley when we were packing up our things after classes. I'd avoided the subject all morning, so as to have a clear head when we were drawing up this master plan, but now I just had to talk about the idea or I'd have burst.

"Yes," said Lesley after a moment's hesitation.

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"Maybe that was what he still had to tell you yesterday evening. I mean, in films we always get so annoyed with

those artificial misunderstandings that are meant to heighten suspense before the happy ending, although a few words could clear them up for good.”

“Exactly! That’s where you always shout at the screen, *Just tell him, you silly cow!*”

Lesley nodded. “But in the film, something always gets in the way. The dog’s bitten through the phone cable, the other girl is feeling mean and doesn’t pass on the news, the boy’s mother says he’s gone to California . . . you know the kind of thing?” She gave me her hairbrush and looked at me hard in the mirror. “You know, the more I think about it, the less likely it seems to me that he *could* have failed to fall in love with you.”

My eyes felt damp with sheer relief. “In that case, he’d still be a bastard, but . . . but I think I could forgive him.”

“So could I,” said Lesley, beaming at me. “I have waterproof mascara and lip gloss here. Want to borrow some?”

Well, it couldn’t hurt, anyway.

WE WERE LAST to leave the classroom again. I was in such a good mood now that Lesley felt it was her duty to dig her elbow into my ribs. “I really don’t want to put a damper on your enthusiasm, but we could be wrong. Because we’ve seen too many romantic films.”

“Yes, I know,” I said. “Oh, there’s James.” Most of the students were already on their way out, so there were only a few left to wonder why I was talking to an empty niche in the wall. “Hello, James!”

“Good day, Miss Gwyneth.” As always, he was wearing a flowered tail-coat, knee breeches, and cream stockings. He had brocade shoes with silver buckles on his feet, and his cravat was so elaborately arranged that he couldn’t possibly have tied it for himself. The oddest things about him were his curly wig, the powder on his face, and the patches like moles that he had stuck to it. For some reason that I couldn’t understand, he called them beauty spots. Without all that, and in sensible clothes, James would probably have been quite good-looking.

“Where were you this morning, James? We had a date to meet at second break, remember?”

James shook his head. “How I hate this fever! And I don’t like the dream, either—everything here is so . . . so *ugly!*” He sighed heavily and pointed to the ceiling. “I wonder what philistines painted over the frescos? My father paid a fortune for them. I like the shepherdess in the middle very much, even if my mother says she’s too scantily clad.” He looked disapprovingly first at me and then at Lesley, his eyes resting for a long time on the pleated skirts of our school uniform and then our knees. “Although if my mother knew the way young persons dress in my fevered dream, she’d be horrified. I’m horrified myself. I would never have thought I could indulge in such a depraved fantasy.”

James didn’t seem to be having a particularly good day. At least Xemerius had decided to stay at home (James hated Xemerius). To keep an eye on the treasure and Mr. Bernard, or so he said, but I secretly suspected he wanted

to look over Aunt Maddy's shoulder again while she was reading. She was halfway through a romantic novel at the moment, and he seemed to be enjoying it.

"Depraved! What a charming compliment, James," I said mildly. I had long ago given up explaining to James that he was not dreaming, but had been dead for about two hundred and thirty years. I suppose no one likes to hear such news.

"Dr. Barrow bled me again just now, and I was even able to drink a few sips of water," he went on. "I had hoped for a different dream this time, but alas, here I am again."

"And I'm very glad to see you," I said warmly. "I'd miss you very much if you went right away."

James managed a smile. "Well, I'd be lying if I were to deny that I've developed a certain affection for you, Miss Gwyneth. And now, shall we go on with our lessons in etiquette?"

"I'm afraid there isn't time, but let's go on tomorrow, okay?" On the stairs I turned back. "Oh, by the way, James, what was the name of your favorite horse in September of the year 1782?"

Two boys pushing a table with an overhead projector on it along the corridor stopped, and Lesley giggled when they both asked, at the same time, "Do you mean me?"

"September last year?" asked James. "Hector, of course. Hector will always be my favorite horse. The most magnificent gray you can imagine."

"And what's your favorite food?"

The boys with the overhead projector looked at me as



if I'd lost my mind. James himself frowned. "What sort of question is that? I have absolutely no appetite just now."

"Never mind. That can wait till tomorrow too. Good-bye, James."

"I'm Finley, you daft cow," said one of the projector pushers, and the other grinned and said, "And my name's Adam, but hey, I don't mind! You're welcome to call me James if you like."

I ignored them both and linked arms with Lesley.

"What was all that about?" she asked on the way downstairs.

"When I meet James at that ball, I want to warn him against catching smallpox," I explained. "He was only twenty-one. Too young to die, don't you agree?"

"I'm not sure that you ought to meddle with that kind of thing," said Lesley. "You know what I mean—fate, predestination, and so on."

"But there must be some reason why he's still haunting this building. Maybe I'm predestined to help him."

"Why exactly do you have to go to this ball?" Lesley inquired.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Apparently Count Saint-Germain said I had to in those nutty *Annals*. So he can get to know me better, or something."

Lesley raised her eyebrows. "Or something?"

I sighed. "Whatever. Anyway, the ball is held in September 1782, but James didn't catch smallpox until 1783. If I can manage to warn him, he might be able to go into the country, for instance, when the epidemic breaks

out. Or at least keep away from Lord Thingy's house, where he caught it. Why are you grinning like that?"

"You're going to say you come from the future, and you know he's soon going to be infected with smallpox, and by way of proof, you'll tell him the name of his favorite horse?"

"Er . . . well, I haven't quite worked out all the details of the plan yet."

"Vaccination would be better," said Lesley, pushing the door to the school yard open. "But that wouldn't be easy to fix either."

"No. What is easy to fix these days?" I said, and groaned. "Oh, damn it!" Charlotte was standing beside the limousine waiting to take me to the Guardians' HQ, where I went every day now. And that could mean only one thing: I was to undergo more torture by minuets, the right way to curtsy, and the date of the Siege of Gibraltar. Useful knowledge for someone going to a ball in 1782, or at least the Guardians thought so.

Oddly enough, that left me cold today, or almost. Maybe because I was too excited by the thought of my next meeting with Gideon.

Lesley narrowed her eyes. "Who's that guy with Charlotte?" She was pointing to red-haired Mr. Marley, an Adept First Degree, whose main distinction along with that resounding title was an ability to blush all over his face and both ears. He was standing beside Charlotte, head hunched down.

I told Lesley who he was. “I think he’s scared of Charlotte,” I added. “But he still thinks she’s great.”

Charlotte had spotted us and was waving impatiently.

“At least they go wonderfully well together where their hair color is concerned,” said Lesley, hugging me. “Good luck. Remember what we were discussing. And go carefully. Oh, and *please* take a photo of that Mr. Giordano.”

“Giordano, just Giordano, if you please,” I said, imitating my dancing master’s nasal tone of voice. “See you this evening.”

“Yes, and Gwenny? Don’t make it too easy for Gideon, will you?”

“At last!” Charlotte snapped at me as I went over to the car. “We’ve been waiting here forever. With everyone staring at us.”

“As if that would bother you. Hello, Mr. Marley, how are you?”

“Er. Fine. Er . . . how are you?” And Mr. Marley was already blushing. I felt sorry for him. I blushed easily myself, but with Mr. Marley, the blood didn’t go just to his cheeks—his ears and his throat also turned the color of ripe tomatoes. Terrible!

“Very well indeed,” I said, although I’d have loved to see his face if I’d said “bloody awful” instead. He held the car door open for us, and Charlotte sat down gracefully on the back seat.

I took the seat opposite her.

The car began moving off. Charlotte looked out of the window, and I stared into space as I wondered whether I ought to be cool and offended when I met Gideon, or perfectly friendly but indifferent. I wished I'd discussed that with Lesley. When we were halfway along the Strand, Charlotte stopped looking at our surroundings and turned her attention to her fingernails instead. Then she suddenly looked up, scrutinized me from head to foot, and asked aggressively, "Who are you going to Cynthia's party with?"

She was obviously spoiling for a fight. What a good thing we'd soon have arrived. The limousine was already turning into the parking area in Crown Office Road. "Hm," I said, "I haven't decided yet. Either Kermit the Frog or Shrek, if he has time. How about you?"

"Gideon said he'd come with me," said Charlotte, looking at me intently. She was only too clearly expecting some reaction.

"Well, that's nice of him," I said in a friendly way, smiling. It wasn't even difficult for me, because by now I was pretty sure how things were with Gideon.

"But I don't know whether I ought to accept his offer." Charlotte sighed, but the lurking, watchful look in her eyes was still the same. "I'm sure he'd hate being with all those childish kids. He's complained to me often enough of the naivety and immaturity of some sixteen-year-olds. . . ."

For a fraction of a second, I considered simply keeping my temper and telling her the truth. But even if I did—well, I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of

having scored a hit. My nod was very understanding. “However, he’ll have your mature and enlightened company, Charlotte, and if that’s not enough for him, he can always have a serious conversation with Mr. Dale about the terrible consequences of alcohol consumption by the young.”

The car braked and went into one of the reserved parking slots outside the house, which for centuries had been the headquarters of the Secret Society of the Guardians. The driver switched off the engine, and at the same moment, Mr. Marley jumped out of the passenger’s seat at the front. I managed to open the back door of the car just before he reached it. By now I had a good idea how the Queen must feel, not even allowed to get out of a car by herself.

I picked up my bag, climbed out of the car, ignoring Mr. Marley’s hand, and said as cheerfully as I could, “I’d say that green is Gideon’s color too.”

Aha! Charlotte didn’t move a muscle, but that round had definitely gone to me. When I’d taken a few steps and could be sure no one would see it, I allowed myself a tiny little triumphant grin. However, next moment the grin froze on my face. Gideon was sitting in the sun on the steps outside the entrance to the Guardians’ HQ. Damn! I’d been much too busy thinking up a good answer to Charlotte to notice my surroundings. My stupid marzipan heart didn’t know whether to shrink in discomfort or beat faster for joy.

When Gideon saw us, he stood up and knocked the dust off his jeans. I slowed down, still trying to decide how

to behave to him. The “friendly but indifferent” approach probably wouldn’t be very convincing if my lower lip was trembling. Unfortunately the “cool but offended for very good reasons” approach couldn’t be put into practice either, in view of my overwhelming need just to fling myself into his arms. So I bit my uncooperative lower lip and tried to look as neutral as possible. As I came closer, I saw with a certain satisfaction that Gideon was chewing his own lower lip, and he too seemed rather nervous. Although he needed a shave and his brown hair looked as if he’d been combing it with his fingers, if at all, I was captivated all over again by the way he looked. I stood at the foot of the steps, feeling undecided, and we looked straight into each other’s eyes for about two seconds. Then his gaze moved to the front of the house opposite, and he said hello to it. At least, I didn’t feel that he was speaking to me. Charlotte pushed past me on her way up the steps. She put one arm around Gideon’s neck and kissed him on the cheek.

“Hello, you,” she said.

Admittedly that was much more elegant than standing rooted to the spot and goggling stupidly. My behavior must have seemed to Mr. Marley like a little attack of faintness, because he asked, “Would you like me to carry your bag, Miss Shepherd?”

“No, thank you, I’m fine,” I said. I pulled myself together, picked up the bag, which had slipped to the ground, and started moving again. Instead of tossing my hair back

and sweeping past Gideon and Charlotte with an icy glance, I climbed the steps with all the carefree verve of a snail dying of old age. It could be that Lesley and I had just seen far too many romantic films. But then Gideon moved Charlotte to one side and reached for my arm.

“Can I have a quick word with you, Gwen?” he asked.

I was so relieved that my knees almost gave way. “Of course.”

Mr. Marley shifted nervously from foot to foot. “We’re a little late already,” he murmured, his ears fiery red.

“He’s right,” chirruped Charlotte. “Gwenney has to practice dancing before she elapses, and you know what Giordano is like if anyone keeps him waiting.” I had no idea how she did it, but her peal of silvery laughter really sounded genuine.

“She’ll be there in ten minutes’ time,” said Gideon.

“Can’t it wait until later?”

“I said ten minutes.” Gideon’s tone of voice was on the verge of downright rude, and Mr. Marley looked really alarmed. I expect I did too.

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders. “As you like,” she said, tossing her head and sweeping past. She did it very well. Mr. Marley dutifully followed her.

When the pair of them had disappeared into the front hall of the house, Gideon seemed to have forgotten what he wanted to say. He went on staring at the stupid house opposite and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand as if it felt very tense. Finally we both took a deep breath at

the same time. “How’s your arm?” I asked, and at the same moment Gideon asked, “Are you all right?” and that made us both grin.

“My arm is fine.” At last he looked at me. Oh, my God, those eyes! I instantly felt weak at the knees again, and I was glad that Mr. Marley wasn’t there with us anymore.

“Gwyneth, I’m terribly sorry about all this. I . . . I behaved very irresponsibly. You really didn’t deserve that.” He was looking so unhappy that I could hardly bear it. “I tried calling you on your mobile about a hundred times yesterday evening, but I couldn’t get through.”

I wondered whether to cut this short and fling myself straight into his arms. But Lesley had said I shouldn’t make it too easy for him. So I just raised my eyebrows and waited for more.

“I didn’t want to hurt you, please believe that,” he said, and he obviously meant it, his voice was so husky. “You looked so dreadfully sad and disappointed yesterday evening.”

“It wasn’t as bad as all that,” I said quietly. I thought I could be forgiven for that lie. No need to rub it in about all the tears I’d shed and my fervent wish to die of galloping consumption. “I was just . . . it rather hurt. . . .” (Okay, so that was the understatement of the century!) “It rather hurt to think you’d only been pretending all along, I mean the kisses, saying you loved me. . . .” I was getting embarrassed, so I stopped.

He looked, if possible, even more remorseful. “I promise you nothing like that will ever happen again.”



What exactly did he mean? I couldn't quite make it out. "Well, now that I know, of course it wouldn't work another time," I said a bit more firmly. "And between you and me, it was a silly plan anyway. People in love aren't influenced more easily than anyone else—far from it! With all those hormones churning around, you never know what they'll do next." I was living proof of that, after all.

"But people do things out of love that they wouldn't do at all usually." Gideon raised a hand as if to caress my cheek, and then he let it fall again. "If you're in love, the other person suddenly seems more important than yourself." If I hadn't known better, I'd almost have thought he was about to burst into tears. "You make sacrifices . . . that's probably what the count meant."

"I don't think the count has any idea what he's talking about," I said scornfully. "If you ask me, he's not what you might call an expert on love, and as for his knowledge of the female mind, it's . . . it's pathetic!" *Now kiss me; I want to know if stubble feels prickly.*

A smile lit up Gideon's face. "You could be right," he said, taking a deep breath like when someone has had a heavy weight fall from his heart. "I'm glad we've cleared that up, anyway. We'll always stay good friends, won't we?"

*What?*

"Good friends?" he repeated, and suddenly my mouth felt dry. "Good friends who know they can trust and rely on each other," he added. "It's really important for you to trust me."

It took a couple of seconds, but then it began to dawn

on me that somewhere in this conversation, we'd branched off in different directions. What Gideon had been trying to say wasn't "please forgive me, I love you," but "let's stay good friends." And every idiot knows that those are two totally different things.

It meant that he hadn't fallen in love with me.

It meant that Lesley and I *had* seen too many romantic films.

It meant . . .

"You *bastard!*" I cried. Fury, bright, hot fury was pouring through me so violently that it made my voice hoarse. "What a nerve! How *dare* you? One day you kiss me and say you've fallen in love with me; the next you say you're sorry for telling such horrible lies—and then you want me to *trust* you?"

Now Gideon also realized that we'd been talking at cross purposes. The smile disappeared from his face. "Gwen—"

"Shall I tell you something? I regret every single tear I shed over you!" I was trying to shout at him, but I failed miserably. "And you needn't imagine there were all that many of them!" I just about managed to croak.

"Gwen!" Gideon tried to take my hand. "Oh, God! I'm so sorry. I really didn't want to . . . *please!*"

Please what? I stared angrily at him. Didn't he notice that he was just making everything even worse? And did he think that pleading look in his eyes would change anything? I wanted to turn around, but Gideon had a firm grasp on my wrist.

## EMERALD GREEN

“Gwen, listen to me. There are dangerous times ahead of us, and it’s important for the two of us to stand by each other. I . . . I really do like you very much, I want us to . . .”

He surely wasn’t going to say it again. Not that corny old bit about good friends. But he did exactly that.

“. . . be good friends. Don’t you see? Unless we can trust each other—”

I tore myself away from him. “As if I wanted to be friends with someone like you!” Now my voice was back, and it was so loud that it made the pigeons fly up from the roof. “You don’t have the faintest idea what friendship means!”

And suddenly it was dead easy. I tossed my hair back, turned on my heel, and swept away.



*You've got to jump off cliffs—  
and build your wings on the way down.*

RAY BRADBURY

## THREE



LET'S STAY FRIENDS—I mean, that really was the end!

“What do you bet a fairy dies every time someone says that anywhere in the world?” I asked. I’d locked myself into the ladies to call Lesley on my mobile, and I was doing my best not to scream, although only half an hour after my conversation with Gideon, that’s what I still felt like doing.

“He said he wants you to *be* friends,” Lesley corrected me. As usual, she’d noticed every word.

“It’s exactly the same,” I said.

“No. I mean yes, maybe.” Lesley sighed. “I don’t understand. Are you sure you definitely let him finish what he was saying? Remember how in *Ten Things I Hate About You*—”

“I did let him finish what he was saying. Unfortunately, I’d add.” I looked at the time. “Oh, shit. I told Mr.

George I'd be back in a minute." I glanced at myself in the mirror above the old-fashioned washbasin. "Oh, *shit!*" I said again. There were two circular red patches on my cheeks. "I think I have some kind of allergic reaction."

"Only caused by rage," was Lesley's diagnosis when I told her what I saw. "How about your eyes? Are they flashing dangerously?"

I stared at my reflection. "Yes, sort of. I look a bit like Helena Bonham Carter as Bellatrix Lestrange in *Harry Potter*. Rather threatening."

"That sounds okay. Listen, you go out now and flash them at everyone for all you're worth, right?"

I nodded obediently and promised to do just that.

After that phone call, I felt a bit better, even if cold water couldn't wash away my fury or the two red spots on my cheeks.

If Mr. George had been wondering where I'd been for so long, he didn't show it.

"Everything all right?" he asked in kindly tones. He'd been waiting for me outside the Old Refectory.

"Everything's fine!" I glanced through the open doorway, but there was no sign of Giordano and Charlotte after all, even though I was far too late for my lesson by now. "I just had to . . . er, put some new rouge on."

Mr. George smiled. Apart from the laughter lines around his eyes and at the corners of his mouth, nothing in his round, friendly face showed that he was well over seventy. The light was reflected on his bald patch, so that

his whole head reminded me of a bowl polished until it shone.

I couldn't help it, I had to smile back. The sight of Mr. George always had a soothing effect on me. "Honestly. You rub it into your face there," I said, pointing to my two furious red spots.

Mr. George gave me his arm. "Come along, my brave girl," he said. "I've let them know that we're going downstairs for you to elapse."

I looked at him in surprise. "But what about Giordano and colonial policy in the eighteenth century?"

Mr. George smiled slightly. "Let's put it this way: I used the short wait while you were in the bathroom to tell Giordano we were afraid you wouldn't have time for his lessons today."

Dear, good Mr. George! He was the only one of the Guardians who seemed to bother about me as a real person at all. Although maybe a little minuet dancing might have calmed me down a bit. Like the way some people work off their aggression on a punching bag. Or by going to the gym. On the other hand, I could really do without Charlotte's supercilious smile right now.

"The chronograph is waiting," he added.

I was happy to take Mr. George's arm. For once, I was even looking forward to elapsing—my daily few hours of controlled travel back to the past—and not just to get away from the horrible present day that meant Gideon. Because today's journey back in time was the key point to

the master plan that Lesley had thought up with me. If it worked as we hoped.

On the way down to the depths of the huge, vaulted cellars, Mr. George and I went right through the Guardians' headquarters. It was hard to get a clear idea of the place, which occupied several buildings. There was so much to see, even in the winding corridors, that you might easily think you were in a museum. Countless framed paintings, ancient maps, handmade tapestries, and whole collections of swords hung on the walls. China that looked valuable, leather-bound books, and old musical instruments were on display in glass-fronted cupboards, and there were any number of chests and carved wooden boxes. In other circumstances, I'd have loved to find out what was inside them.

"I don't know much about cosmetics, but if you want to let off steam to someone about Gideon—well, I'm a good listener," said Mr. George.

"About Gideon?" I said slowly, as if I had to stop and work out who Gideon was. "Oh, everything's fine between Gideon and me." So there! I punched the wall in passing. "We're *friends*, nothing more. Just *friends*." Unfortunately the word didn't really come out very easily. I was kind of grinding my teeth as I said it.

"I was sixteen once myself, Gwyneth." Mr. George's little eyes twinkled kindly at me. "And I promise I won't say I warned you. Even though I did—"

"I'm sure you were a really nice boy when you were sixteen." Hard to imagine Mr. George ever cunningly



deceiving someone by kissing her and saying nice things without meaning them. *You only have to be in the same room and I need to touch you and kiss you.* I tried to shake off the memory of the way Gideon had looked at me by treading extra firmly as I walked along. The china in the glass-fronted cupboards shook slightly, clinking.

Right. Who needs to dance a minuet to work off aggression? This would do just fine. Although smashing one of those expensive-looking vases might have had an even better effect.

Mr. George looked sideways at me for some time, but finally he just pressed my arm and sighed. We were passing suits of armor at irregular intervals, and as usual, I had an uncomfortable feeling that I was under observation.

"There's someone inside that armor, isn't there?" I whispered to Mr. George. "Some poor novice who can't go to the toilet all day, right? I can tell he's staring at us."

"No," said Mr. George, laughing quietly. "But there are security cameras installed behind the visors of the helmets. That's probably why you feel you're being watched."

Oh. Security cameras. At least I didn't have to feel sorry for security cameras.

When we had reached the first flight of stairs down to the vaults, it struck me that Mr. George had forgotten something. "Don't you want to blindfold me?"

"I think we can dispense with that today," said Mr. George. "There's no one here to say otherwise, is there?"

I looked at him in surprise. Normally I had to go the whole way with a black scarf tied around my eyes, because

the Guardians didn't want me to be able to find my own way to the place where they kept the chronograph that made controlled time travel possible. For some reason, they thought that if I knew the way, I'd steal it, which of course was utter nonsense. I didn't just think the thing uncanny—I mean, it was fueled by blood! I ask you!—I hadn't the faintest idea how you set the countless little cogwheels, levers, and flaps to get it to work. But all the Guardians were absolutely paranoid about the possibility of theft.

That was probably because there had once been two chronographs. And almost seventeen years ago, my cousin Lucy and her boyfriend, Paul, Numbers Nine and Ten in the Circle of Twelve, the time travelers, had gone off with one of them. So far I hadn't found out just why they stole it. But I was groping around blindly in the dark about this whole business, anyway.

“Oh, and by the way, Madame Rossini asked me to tell you that she's decided on a different color for your ball dress. I'm afraid I've forgotten what color, but I'm sure you'll look bewitching in it.” Mr. George chuckled. “Even if Giordano has been telling me, yet again, about all the many terrible faux pas you're bound to make in the eighteenth century.”

My heart jumped. I'd have to go to that ball with Gideon, and I couldn't imagine being in any fit state to dance a minuet with him tomorrow without *really* breaking something. His foot, for instance.

“Why the hurry?” I asked. “I mean, from our point of

view, why does the ball absolutely have to be tomorrow evening? Why can't we simply wait a few weeks? After all, surely the ball is held on that one day in 1782 anyway, whatever the date here when we go to it?" Quite apart from Gideon, this was a question that had been on my mind for some time.

"Count Saint-Germain has worked out precisely how much time in the present should be allowed to pass between your visits to him," said Mr. George, letting me go down the spiral staircase first.

The farther and deeper down we went through the labyrinth of cellars, the stronger the musty smell. Down here there were no pictures on the walls, and although movement detectors saw to it that a bright light came on wherever we went, the corridors branching off to our left and right were lost in eerie darkness after a few yards. Apparently people had been lost down here several times. Some hadn't come up until several days later, in parts of the city far away from the Temple. But that was just hearsay.

"But *why* did the count say it had to be tomorrow? And why do the Guardians follow his instructions so slavishly?"

Mr. George didn't answer that. He only sighed heavily.

"I was only thinking that if we gave ourselves a couple of weeks' more time, well, the count wouldn't even notice, would he?" I said. "He's sitting there in 1782, and time isn't going any more slowly for him. But then I could learn all that minuet stuff at my leisure, and I might even know

who was besieging whom in Gibraltar and why.” I preferred to leave Gideon out of it. “Then no one would have to go on and on at me, and be afraid of all the dreadful mistakes I’d make at the ball, just in case the way I behave shows that I come from the future. So why does the count say it absolutely has to be tomorrow, in our time, when I go to the ball?”

“Yes, why?” murmured Mr. George. “It’s almost as if he were afraid of you. And of what you might find out if you had more time.”

It wasn’t far now to the old alchemical laboratory. Unless I was mistaken, it must be just around the next corner. So I slowed down. “Afraid of me? He throttled me without even touching me, and since he can read thoughts, he knows perfectly well that *I* am terrified of *him*, not the other way around.”

“He throttled you? Without touching you?” Mr. George had stopped and was staring at me. He looked shocked. “Dear heavens. Gwyneth, why didn’t you tell us about this before?”

“Would you have believed me?”

Mr. George passed the back of his hand over his bald patch and was just opening his mouth to say something when we heard footsteps coming and a heavy door slammed shut. Mr. George looked alarmed—more alarmed than I’d have expected—led me around the corner in the direction from which the sound of the door had come, and took a black scarf out of his jacket pocket.

It was Falk de Villiers. Gideon’s uncle and Grand

Master of the Lodge, walking energetically along the corridor. But he smiled when he saw us.

“Ah, there you are. Poor Marley has just been ringing up to the house to ask what had become of you, so I thought I’d take a look.”

I blinked and rubbed my eyes, as if Mr. George had only just taken the blindfold off, but that was obviously an unnecessary bit of playacting, because Falk de Villiers didn’t even notice. He opened the door to the chronograph room, once the old alchemical laboratory.

Falk was maybe a year or so older than my mum and very good-looking, like all the members of the de Villiers family I’d met so far. I always thought of him as the lead wolf of the pack. His thick hair had gone gray early and made an intriguing contrast with his amber eyes.

“There, you see, Marley? No one’s gone missing,” he said in a jovial tone to Mr. Marley, who had been sitting on a chair in the chronograph room and now jumped up, nervously kneading his fingers.

“I only . . . I thought that, to be on the safe side . . .” He stammered. “I do apologize, sir. . . .”

“No, no, we’re glad to know that you take your duties so seriously,” said Mr. George, and Falk asked, “Where’s Mr. Whitman? He and I had a date to see Dean Smythe over a cup of tea, and I was going to collect him.”

“He’s just left,” said Mr. Marley. “They said they really did have to meet him.”

“Right, then I’ll be off. I may catch up with him on the way. Coming, Thomas?”

After a brief sidelong glance at me, Mr. George shook his head.

“And we’ll see each other again tomorrow, Gwyneth. When you’re off to the great ball.” But halfway out the door, Falk turned again and said, as if casually, “Oh, and give your mother my regards, Gwyneth. Is she all right?”

“My mum? Yes, she’s fine.”

“Glad to hear it.” I must have been looking rather bewildered, because he cleared his throat and added, “Mothers who are on their own and working full-time don’t always have an easy life these days, so I’m pleased for her.”

Now I was intentionally looking bewildered.

“Or—or maybe she isn’t on her own? An attractive woman like Grace is bound to meet a lot of men, so perhaps there’s someone in particular. . . .”

Falk was looking at me expectantly, but when I frowned, puzzled, he looked at his watch and cried, “Oh, so late already. I really must be on my way.”

“Was that a question he asked?” I said when Falk had closed the door behind him.

“Yes,” said Mr. George and Mr. Marley at the same time, and Mr. Marley went scarlet. “Er,” he added, “at least, it sounded to me as if he wanted to know whether your mother has a steady boyfriend,” he muttered.

Mr. George laughed. “Falk’s right, it really is late. If Gwyneth is to get any homework done this evening, we have to send her back into the past now. What year shall we pick, Gwyneth?”

As I’d agreed with Lesley, I said as indifferently as

possible, “I don’t mind. It was 1956 the other day—am I right, was it 1956? There were no rats in the cellar then. It was even quite comfortable.” Of course I didn’t breathe a word about meeting my grandfather in secret in the comfort of the rat-free cellar. “I managed to learn my French vocabulary there without trembling with fright the whole time.”

“No problem,” said Mr. George. He opened a thick journal, while Mr. Marley pushed aside the wall hanging that hid the safe containing the chronograph.

I tried to peer over Mr. George’s shoulder as he leafed through the journal, but his broad back got in the way.

“Let’s see. That was 24 July 1956,” said Mr. George. “You spent all afternoon there and came back at six thirty in the evening.”

“Six thirty would be a good time,” I said, crossing my fingers that our plan would work out. If I could go back to the exact time when I had left the room on that visit, my grandfather would still be down there, and I wouldn’t have to waste any time looking for him.

“I think we’d better make it six thirty-one,” said Mr. George. “We don’t want you colliding with yourself.”

Mr. Marley, who had put the chest containing the chronograph on the table and was now taking the device, which was about the size of a mantelpiece clock, out of its velvet wrappings, murmured, “But strictly speaking, it’s not night there yet. Mr. Whitman said—”

“Yes, we know that Mr. Whitman is a stickler for the rules,” said Mr. George, as he fiddled with the little

cogwheels. In between delicate colored drawings of patterns, planets, animals, and plants, there were gemstones set into the surface of the strange machine, so big and bright that you felt they must be imitations—like the interlinking beads that my little sister liked to play with. All the time travelers in the Circle of Twelve had different jewels allotted to them. Mine was the ruby, and the diamond, so big that it was probably worth the price of a whole apartment block in the West End of London, “belonged” to Gideon. “However, I think we are gentlemen enough not to leave a young lady sitting on her own in a vaulted cellar at night, don’t you agree, Leo?”

Mr. Marley nodded uncertainly.

“Leo?” I said. “That’s a nice name.”

“Short for Leopold,” said Mr. Marley, his ears shining like the rear lights of a car. He sat down at the table, put the journal in front of him, and took the top off a fountain pen. The small, neat handwriting in which a long series of dates, times, and names had been recorded there was obviously his. “My mother thinks it’s a terrible name, but it’s traditional to call every eldest son in our family Leopold.”

“Leo is a direct descendant of Baron Miroslav Alexander Leopold Rakoczy,” explained Mr. George, turning around for a moment and looking me in the eye. “You know—Count Saint-Germain’s legendary traveling companion, known in the *Annals* as the Black Leopard.”

I was baffled. “Oh, really?”



In my mind, I was comparing Mr. Marley with the thin, pale figure of Rakoczy, whose black eyes had terrified me so badly. But I didn't really know whether I ought to tell him he was lucky not to look like his shady ancestor, or whether maybe it was even worse to be red-haired, freckled, and moonfaced.

"You see, my paternal grandfather—" Mr. Marley was beginning, but Mr. George quickly interrupted him. "I am sure your grandfather would be very proud of you," he said firmly. "Particularly if he knew how well you have passed your exams."

"Except in the Use of Traditional Weapons," said Mr. Marley. "I was marked only satisfactory there."

"Oh, well, no one needs that these days. Use of traditional weapons is an outmoded subject." Mr. George put his hand out to me. "Here we are, Gwyneth. Off to 1956 you go. I have set the chronograph to exactly three and a half hours. Keep a tight hold on your bag and be sure not to leave anything lying around in the cellar when you travel back, remember? Mr. Marley will be waiting for you here."

I clutched my schoolbag with one arm and gave Mr. George my free hand. He put my forefinger into one of the tiny compartments behind flaps in the chronograph. A needle went into it, and the magnificent ruby lit up and filled the whole room with red light. I closed my eyes while I let the usual dizzy feeling carry me away. When I opened them a second later, Mr. Marley and Mr. George had disappeared, and so had the table.

It was darker, the room was lit by only a single electric bulb, and my grandfather Lucas was standing in the light of it looking at me, puzzled.

“You . . . you—didn’t it work, then?” he cried, alarmed. In 1956, he was thirty-two years old, and he didn’t look much like the old man of eighty I’d known when I was a little girl. “You disappeared over there, and now here you are again.”

“Yes,” I said proudly, suppressing my instinct to hug him. It was the same as at our other meetings: the sight of him brought a lump to my throat. My grandfather had died when I was ten years old, and it was both wonderful and sad to see him again six years after his funeral. Sad not because when we met in the past he wasn’t the grandfather I had known, but a kind of unfinished version of him, but because I was a complete stranger to him. He hadn’t the faintest idea how often I had sat on his lap or that, when my father died, he was the person who comforted me by telling me stories, and we always used to say good night in a secret language of our own invention that no one else understood. He didn’t know how much I had loved him, and I couldn’t tell him. No one likes to hear that kind of thing from someone after spending only a few hours with her. I ignored the lump in my throat as well as I could. “For you, only about a minute has probably passed, so I’ll forgive you for not shaving that mustache off yet. But for me it’s been a few days, and all kinds of things have happened.”

Lucas stroked his mustache and grinned. “So you simply . . . Well, that was very clever of you, granddaughter.”

“Yes, wasn’t it? But to be honest, it was my friend Lesley’s idea. So that we could be sure I’d meet you and then we wouldn’t have to waste any time.”

“And I haven’t had a moment to wonder what to do next. I was just beginning to get over your visit and thinking about it all.” He examined me with his head to one side. “Yes, you do look different. You didn’t have that barrette in your hair earlier, and somehow you seem thinner.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“It wasn’t a compliment. You look as if you were in rather a bad way.” He came a little closer and scrutinized me critically. “Is everything all right?” he asked gently.

“Everything’s fine,” I meant to say cheerfully, but to my horror, I burst into tears. “Everything’s fine,” I sobbed.

“Oh, dear,” said Lucas, patting me clumsily on the back. “As bad as all that?”

For several minutes, I couldn’t do anything but let the tears flow. And I’d thought I was back in control of myself! Fury at the way Gideon had behaved seemed the right reaction—very brave and adult. And it would look much better in a film than all this crying. I’m afraid Xemerius was only too right to compare me to an indoor fountain.

“Friends!” I finally sniffed, because my grandfather had a right to an explanation. “He wants us to be friends. And for me to trust him.”

Lucas hunched his head down and frowned, looking baffled. “And that makes you cry because . . . ?”

“Because yesterday he said he loved me!”

If possible Lucas looked even more puzzled than before. “Well, that doesn’t necessarily seem a bad way to start a friendship.”

My tears dried up as if someone had turned off the electricity powering the indoor fountain. “Grandpa! Don’t be so dim!” I cried. “First he kisses me, then I find out that it was all just tactics and manipulation, and then he comes out with that let’s-be-friends stuff!”

“Oh. I see. What a . . . what a scoundrel!” Lucas still didn’t look entirely convinced. “Forgive me for asking silly questions, but I hope we’re not talking about that de Villiers boy, are we? Number Eleven, the Diamond?”

“Yes, we are,” I said. “That’s exactly who we’re talking about.”

My grandfather groaned. “Oh, really! Teenagers! As if all this weren’t complicated enough already!” He threw me a fabric handkerchief, took my schoolbag out of my hand, and said firmly, “That’s enough crying. How much time do we have?”

“The chronograph’s set for me to travel back at ten P.M. your time.” Funnily enough, crying had been good for me, much better than the adult, being-furious variant. “Do you have anything to eat? I’m feeling a bit peckish.”

That made Lucas laugh. “In that case we’d better go upstairs, little chicken, and find you something to peck at. It’s claustrophobic down here. And I’ll have to call home

and say I'll be late back." He opened the door. "Come along, and you can tell me all about it on the way. And if anyone sees you, don't forget that you're my cousin Hazel from the country."

ALMOST AN HOUR LATER, we were sitting in Lucas's office, thinking so hard that the steam was practically coming out of our ears. In front of us we had piles of paper with scribbled notes, mostly consisting of dates, circles, arrows, and question marks, as well as thick leather-bound folio volumes (the *Annals of the Guardians* for several decades back) and the usual plate of biscuits. All through the ages, the Guardians seemed to have ample stocks of those.

"Too little information to go on, too little time," Lucas kept saying. He was prowling restlessly up and down the room, ruffling his hair. In spite of the stuff he put on it to keep it smooth, it was beginning to stick out in all directions. "What do you think I can have hidden in that chest?"

"Maybe a book containing all the information I need," I said. We had passed the young man on guard by the stairs without any difficulty. He had been asleep, the same as on my last visit, and the fumes of alcohol he gave off were enough to make any passerby feel drowsy too. In fact the Guardians seemed to be much less strict than I'd have expected in 1956. No one thought it odd for Lucas to be working late or for his cousin Hazel from the country to be keeping him company. Not that there were many people left in the building at this time of the evening.

Young Mr. George had obviously gone home, which was a pity. I'd have liked to see him again.

"A book—well, maybe," said Lucas, thoughtfully munching a biscuit. He had been about to light a cigarette three times, but I'd taken it out of his hand. I didn't want to be smelling of cigarette smoke again when I traveled back. "The code and the coordinates make sense, I like that bit, and it sounds like me. I've always had a weakness for codes. Only how did Lucy and Paul know it was in the thingy . . . in the *Yellow Horse* book?"

"*Green Rider*, Grandpa," I said patiently. "The book was in your library, and the piece of paper with the code was between its pages. Maybe Lucy and Paul left it there."

"But that's not logical. If they disappear into the past in 1994, then why do I leave a chest walled up in my own house so many years later?" He stopped prowling and bent over the books. "This is driving me crazy! Do you know what it's like to feel the solution is within reach? I wish travel into the future by chronograph were possible. Then you could interview me in person."

Suddenly I had an idea, and it was such a good one that I was tempted to pat myself spontaneously on the back. I thought of what Grandpa had told me last time we met. According to him, Lucy and Paul, getting bored with the time they spent elapsing here, had traveled farther back in the past and seen exciting things, like a performance of *Hamlet* in 1602, in Shakespeare's own lifetime.

"I know!" I cried, doing a little dance for joy.

My grandfather frowned. “You know what exactly?” he asked, intrigued.

“Suppose you send me farther back into the past with *your* chronograph?” I said excitedly. “Then I could meet Lucy and Paul and simply ask them.”

Lucas raised his head. “And *when* would you meet them? We don’t know what time they’re hiding in.”

“But we do know when they visited you here. If I joined them then, we could all discuss it together—”

My grandfather interrupted me. “But at the time of their visits here in 1948 and 1949, when they arrived from the years 1992 and 1993”—at the mention of each date, he tapped our notes and ran his forefinger along several lines with arrows pointing to them—“at those times, Lucy and Paul didn’t know enough either, and they told me everything that they did know then. No, if you meet them at all it would have to be after they ran away with the chronograph.” Once again he tapped our notes. “That would make sense. Anything else would just add to the confusion.”

“Then . . . then I’ll travel to the year 1912, when I met them once before, at Lady Tilney’s house in Eaton Place.”

“That would be a possibility, but it doesn’t work out in terms of time.” Lucas looked gloomily at the clock on the wall. “You weren’t even sure of the exact date, let alone the time of day. Not forgetting that we’d have to read your blood into the chronograph first, otherwise you couldn’t use it for time travel.” He ruffled his hair up again. “And finally you’d have to get from here to Belgravia on your

own, and that's probably not so simple in 1912 . . . oh, and we'd need a costume . . . no, with the best will in the world, it can't be done in such a short time span. We'll have to think of something else. The solution's on the tip of my tongue. I just need more time to think it over, and maybe a cigarette. . . ."

I shook my head. I wasn't giving up so easily. I knew it was a good idea. "We could take the chronograph to just outside Lady Tilney's house in *this* time, and then I'd travel straight back to 1912—that would save a lot of time, wouldn't it? And as for the costume . . . why are you staring at me like that?"

All of a sudden, Lucas's eyes were wide open. "Oh, my God!" he whispered. "*That's* it!"

"What?"

"The chronograph! Granddaughter, you're a genius!" Lucas came around the table and hugged me.

"I'm a genius?" I repeated. It was my grandfather's turn to do a kind of dance of joy this time.

"Yes! And I'm another! Geniuses, the pair of us, because now we know what's hidden in the chest!"

Well, I didn't. "So what is it?"

"The chronograph!" cried Lucas.

"The chronograph?" I echoed him.

"It's only logical. Whatever period Lucy and Paul took it to, somehow or other it must have made its way back to me, and I hid it. For you! In my own house. Not particularly original, but very logical!"

"You think so?" I stared at him uncertainly. It seemed



to me very far-fetched, but then logic had never been my strong point.

“Trust me, granddaughter, I just know I’m right!” The enthusiasm in Lucas’s face gave way to a frown. “Of course that opens up all sorts of new possibilities. Now we must think hard.” He cast another glance at the clock on the wall. “Damn it, we need more time.”

“I can try to get them to send me back to 1956 again next time I elapse,” I said. “Only it won’t be tomorrow afternoon, because that’s when I have to go to that ball and see the count again.” The mere idea immediately made me feel queasy once more, and not just because of Gideon.

“No, no, no!” cried Lucas. “That won’t do. We must be one step ahead before you face the count again.” He rubbed his forehead. “Think, think, think!”

“Can’t you see the steam coming out of my ears? I’ve done nothing but think for the last hour,” I assured him, but he’d obviously been talking to himself.

“First we must read your blood into the chronograph. You won’t be able to do that without help in the year 2011; it’s much too complicated. And then I must explain how to set the chronograph itself.” Another anxious look at the clock. “If I call our doctor now, he could be here in half an hour, that is if we’re lucky enough to find him at home. . . . The only trouble is, how do I explain why I want him to take some of my cousin Hazel’s blood? Back when Lucy and Paul were here, we took their blood officially, for scientific purposes, but you’re here incognito, and it must stay that way, or—”

“Hang on,” I interrupted him. “Can’t we take some of my blood ourselves?”

Lucas looked at me, intrigued. “Well, I’m trained in a good many skills, but I’m no use with medical needles. To be honest, I can’t even stand the sight of blood. It turns my stomach—”

“I can take the blood from myself,” I said.

“Really?” He looked astonished. “They teach you how to use medical needles in school in your time?”

“No, Grandpa, they don’t,” I said impatiently, “but we do learn that if you cut yourself with a knife, blood flows. Do you have a knife?”

Lucas hesitated. “Well, I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Okay, I have one of my own.” I opened my schoolbag and took out the glasses case in which Lesley had hidden the Japanese vegetable knife, in case I was attacked while traveling in time and needed a weapon. My grandfather looked very surprised when I opened the case.

“Before you ask, no, this isn’t part of the usual students’ school equipment in 2011,” I said.

Lucas swallowed, then he straightened his back and said, “All right. Then let’s go to the Dragon Hall, stopping off on the way to collect a pipette from the doctor’s laboratory.” He glanced at the volumes of the *Annals* on the table and stuck one under his arm. “We’ll take this with us. And the biscuits. For my nerves! Don’t forget your bag.”

“But why are we going to the Dragon Hall?” I put the glasses case back in my bag and stood up.

“That’s where the chronograph is.” Lucas closed the door behind me and listened for sounds in the corridor, but all was quiet. “If we meet anyone, we’ll say I’m giving you a guided tour of the building, right, Cousin Hazel?”

I nodded. “You mean the chronograph is just left standing around? In our time, it’s locked in a safe down in the cellar for fear of thieves.”

“Its shrine in the Dragon Hall is locked too, of course,” said Lucas, urging me on down the stairs. “But we’re not really afraid of theft. There aren’t even any time travelers among us who could use it. The only real excitement was when Lucy and Paul eloped to spend time with us, but that’s years ago now. At the moment, the chronograph isn’t the focus of the Guardians’ attention. Which is lucky for you and me, I’d say.”

The building did indeed seem to be empty, although Lucas told me in a whisper that it was never entirely deserted. I looked longingly out of the windows at the mild summer evening. What a pity I couldn’t go out again and explore the year 1956 more closely. Lucas noticed my glance and said, smiling, “Believe me, I’d far rather be sitting somewhere comfortable with you, smoking a cigarette, but we have work to do.”

“You really should lay off the cigarettes, Grandpa. Smoking is so bad for your health. And please, do shave that mustache off. It doesn’t suit you a bit.”

“Sssh,” whispered Lucas. “If anyone hears you calling me Grandpa, that really will take some explaining.”

But we didn’t meet anyone, and when we entered the

Dragon Hall a few minutes later, we could see the evening sun still sparkling on the Thames beyond the gardens and walls. The Dragon Hall was as overwhelmingly beautiful a sight in 1956 as in 2011, with its majestic proportions, deep windows, and elaborate painted carvings on the walls, and as always, I put my head back to admire the huge carved dragon winding its way over the ceiling past the huge chandeliers, looking as if it was just about to take off into the air.

Lucas bolted the door. He seemed much more nervous than I was, and his hands were shaking when he took the chronograph out of its shrine—a small cupboard—and put it on the table in the middle of the Hall.

“When I was sending Lucy and Paul back with it, it was a tremendous adventure. We had such fun,” he said.

I thought of Lucy and Paul, and nodded. Yes, I’d met them only once, at Lady Tilney’s house, but I could imagine what my grandfather meant. Stupidly, at the same moment, I thought of Gideon. Had his enjoyment of our adventures together been just pretense as well? Or only the bit where he pretended to love me?

I swiftly brought the Japanese vegetable knife and what I was about to do with it to the front of my mind instead. And guess what, it worked. At least, I didn’t burst into tears.

My grandfather wiped the palms of his hands on his trousers. “I’m beginning to feel too old for these adventures,” he said.

My eyes went to the chronograph. To me, it looked

exactly like the one that had sent me here, a complicated device full of flaps, levers, little drawers, cogwheels, and knobs, covered all over with miniature drawings.

“I don’t object if you contradict me,” said Lucas, sounding slightly injured. “Something along the lines of *but you’re much too young to feel old!*”

“Oh. Yes, of course you are. Although that mustache makes you look decades older.”

“Arista says it makes me look serious and statesman-like.”

I merely raised my eyebrows in a meaningful way, and my young grandfather, muttering to himself, bent over the chronograph. “Now, watch carefully: you set the year with these ten little wheels. And before you ask why so many, we feed in the date in Roman numerals—I hope you know those.”

“I think so.” I took a spiral notebook and a pen out of my bag. I was never going to remember all this unless I wrote it down.

“And you set this one,” said Lucas, pointing to another cogwheel, “to the month you want. But watch out—with this one, for some reason, and only this one, we work to an old Celtic calendar system in which month one is November, so October is number twelve.”

I rolled my eyes. That was so typical of the Guardians! I’d suspected for a long time that they coded simple things to make them as complicated as possible, just to emphasize their own importance. But I gritted my teeth, and after about twenty minutes, I realized that the whole thing

wasn't witchcraft after all, once you understood the system.

"I can do it now." I interrupted my grandfather as he was about to begin again from the beginning, and I closed my notebook. "Now we must read my blood in. And then . . . how late is it?"

"It's important that you don't make any mistakes at all setting the chronograph. . . ." Lucas was staring unhappily at the Japanese vegetable knife now that I'd taken it out of the glasses case again. "Otherwise you'll land somewhere . . . well, sometime else. And even worse, you won't have any control over when you go back to. Oh, my God, that knife looks terrible. Are you really going to do it?"

"Of course I am." I rolled up my sleeve. "I just don't know the best place to cut myself. A cut on the hand would attract attention when I travel back. And we wouldn't get more than a few drops out of a finger."

"Not if you nearly saw off your fingertip," said Lucas, with a shudder. "You bleed like a stuck pig then. I did it myself once—"

"I think I'll go for my forearm. Ready?" It was kind of funny that Lucas was more scared than I was.

He swallowed with difficulty and clutched the flowered teacup that was supposed to catch my blood. "Isn't there a main artery running along just there? Oh, my God, I feel weak at the knees. You'll end up bleeding to death here in 1956 because of your own grandfather's carelessness."

"Yes, it's a good big artery, but you'd have to slit it

lengthwise to bleed to death. Or so I've read. That's where many would-be suicides go wrong, and then they're found and survive, but next time, they know how to do it properly."

"For God's sake!" cried Lucas.

I did feel a little queasy myself, but there was no alternative. Desperate times call for desperate measures, as Lesley would say. I ignored Lucas's shocked expression and put the blade to the inside of my forearm about four inches above my wrist. Without pressing very hard, I ran it over the pale skin. It was meant to be only a trial cut, but it went deeper than I'd expected, and the thin red line quickly grew broader. Blood dripped from it. The pain, an uncomfortable burning sensation, began a second later. A thin but steady rivulet of blood ran into the teacup trembling in Lucas's hand. Perfect.

"Cuts through skin as if it were butter," I said, impressed. "Lesley said so. It really is a murderously sharp knife."

"Put it away," Lucas insisted. He looked as if he might throw up any moment. "Good heavens, you're a brave girl, a real Montrose. True to the family motto—"

I giggled. "Yes, I must inherit it from you."

Lucas's grin was rather wry. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"Of course it does," I said. "Is that enough?"

"Yes, it ought to be enough." Lucas retched a little.

"Want me to open a window?"

"All right." He put the cup down beside the chronograph and took a deep breath. "The rest is easy." He picked

up the pipette. “I just have to put three drops of your blood into each of these two openings—see, under the tiny raven here and under the yin and yang sign? Then I turn the wheel and press this lever down. There we go. Hear that?”

Inside the chronograph, several little cogwheels began turning. There was a grinding, crunching, humming sound, and the air seemed to be warming up. The ruby flickered briefly, and then the sound of the little wheels died away and all was still again. “Uncanny, isn’t it?”

I nodded, and tried to ignore the goose bumps all over me. “So now the blood of all the time travelers except Gideon is in the original chronograph, right? What would happen if his blood was read in as well?” I had folded Lucas’s handkerchief and was pressing it to the cut.

“Apart from the fact that no one knows for sure, the information is strictly secret,” said Lucas. Some color was coming back into his face. “Every Guardian has to kneel down and swear an oath never to mention the secret to anyone outside the Lodge. He swears on his life.”

“Oh.”

Lucas sighed. “But I tell you what . . . I have rather a weakness for breaking oaths.” He pointed to a little compartment on the chronograph, decorated with a twelve-pointed star. “One thing’s certain: when the blood of all the Twelve is read in, it will complete a process inside the chronograph, and something will land in this compartment. The prophecies speak of the ‘essence’ under the twelve-pointed star or, alternatively, of the philosopher’s stone. *The precious stones shall all unite, the scent of time shall*



*fill the night, once time links the fraternity, one man lives for eternity.*”

“Is that all there is to the secret?” I said, disappointed. “Just vague, confused stuff again.”

“Well, if you put all the hints together, it’s fairly concrete. *Under the sign of the twelvefold star, all sickness and ills will flee afar.* Sounds as if, used properly, the substance produced in the chronograph will be able to cure all human diseases.”

That sounded a good deal better.

“Well, in that case, I suppose going to all this trouble would pay off,” I murmured, thinking of the Guardians’ mania for secrecy and their complicated rules and rituals. If a cure for all diseases was the outcome, you could almost understand why they thought so well of themselves. Yes, it would be worth waiting a few hundred years for such a miraculous medicine. And Count Saint-Germain would definitely deserve respect for finding out about it and making the discovery possible. If only he weren’t such a repellent character. . . .

“But Lucy and Paul doubt whether we really ought to believe the philosopher’s stone theory,” said Lucas, as if he had guessed my thoughts. “They say that someone who doesn’t shrink from murdering his own great-great-great-grandfather won’t necessarily have the good of all mankind at heart.” He cleared his throat. “Has it stopped bleeding?”

“Not yet, but it’s slowing down.” I held my hand in the air to speed up the process. “And now what do we do? Shall I just try the thing out?”

"For heaven's sake, it's not a car to be taken for a test drive," said Lucas, wringing his hands.

"Why not?" I asked. "Wasn't that the whole idea?"

"Well, yes," he said, squinting at the thick folio volume he had brought. "I suppose you're right. At least that way we can make sure it works, even if we don't have much time left." Suddenly he was all eager again. Leaning forward, he opened the volume of the *Annals*. "We have to take care not to pick a date when you'd burst into the middle of a Lodge meeting here. Or run into one of the de Villiers brothers. They spent hours and hours of their lives elapsing in the Dragon Hall."

"Could I maybe meet Lady Tilney? Alone?" I'd had another good idea. "Preferably sometime after 1912."

"I wonder if that would be wise." Lucas was leafing through the volume. "We don't want to make things more complicated than they already are."

"But we can't afford to waste our few chances," I cried, thinking of what Lesley kept on telling me. I was to exploit every opportunity, she said, and above all, ask as many questions as I could think of. "Who knows when the next chance may come?" I asked. "There could be something else in the chest, and it might not get me any farther. When did you and I first meet?"

"On 12 August 1948, at twelve noon," said Lucas, deep in the *Annals*. "I'll never forget it."

"Exactly, and to make sure you never forget it, I'm going to write it down for you," I said. Yes, I really was a

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bit of a genius, I thought. I scribbled on a page in my notebook:

*For Lord Lucas Montrose—important!!!*

*12 August 1948, 12 noon, the alchemical laboratory.*

*Please come alone.*

*Gwyneth Shepherd*

I tore the page out with a flourish and folded it.

My grandfather glanced up from the folio for a moment. “I could send you to the year 1852, 16 February, at midnight. That’s where Lady Tilney elapses after leaving her own time on 25 December 1929, at nine A.M.,” he murmured. “Poor thing, she couldn’t even spend Christmas Day in comfort at home. At least they gave her a kerosene lamp. Listen, this is what it says here: *12:30 P.M.: Lady Tilney comes back from the year 1852 seeming very cheerful. By the light of the kerosene lamp she took, she finished making two crochet-work piglets for the charity bazaar on Twelfth Night, to be held this year on the theme of Country Life.*” He turned to look at me. “Crochet-work pigs! Can you imagine it? Of course, she may get the shock of her life if you suddenly appear out of nowhere. Do we really want to risk it?”

“She’s armed only with a crochet hook, and they have blunt ends as far as I remember.” I bent over the chronograph. “Right, first the year. 1852, that begins with M, right? MDCCCLII. And the month of February is number three in the Celtic calendar you were talking about—no, four—”

“What are you doing? We have to bandage that cut and do some thinking first.”

“No time,” I said. “The day . . . this lever sets it, right?”

Lucas was looking anxiously over my shoulder. “Not so fast! It has to be exactly right, or else . . . or else . . .” He was looking likely to throw up again. “And you must never be holding the chronograph, or you’ll take it into the past with you. And then you couldn’t get back.”

“Like Lucy and Paul,” I whispered.

“Let’s choose a brief three-minute window of time, to be on the safe side. Make it twelve thirty to twelve thirty-three A.M. Then at least she’ll be sitting comfortably making crochet-work piglets. If she happens to be asleep, don’t wake her, or she might have a heart attack—”

“But then wouldn’t it say so in the *Annals*?” I interrupted him. “When I met Lady Tilney I got the impression that she was a pretty tough character, not the sort to fall down in a faint.”

Lucas moved the chronograph over to the window and put it down behind the curtain. “We can be sure there won’t be any furniture standing here. No need to roll your eyes. Timothy de Villiers once made a crash landing on a table and broke his leg.”

“So suppose Lady Tilney is standing right here looking dreamily out at the night? Oh, don’t look at me like that! Only joking, Grandpa.” I pushed him gently aside, knelt on the floor in front of the chronograph, and opened the little flap just under the ruby. It was exactly the right size for my finger.

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“Wait a moment! Your cut!”

“We can see to that in three minutes’ time. See you then,” I said, taking a deep breath and pressing my fingertip down firmly on the needle.

The familiar dizzy roller-coaster sensation came over me, and as the red light began to glow and Lucas was saying, “But I still have to . . .,” everything blurred before my eyes.



*While rumor has it that the Jacobite army has reached Derby and is now advancing on London, we have moved into our new headquarters. We sincerely hope that reports of 10,000 French soldiers joining the forces of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender to the throne (known to the populace as Bonnie Prince Charlie), will prove mistaken, so that we can celebrate a peaceful Christmas in the city. It is impossible to imagine more suitable accommodation for the Guardians than the venerable buildings here in the Temple. The Knights Templar themselves were, after all, guardians of great mysteries. Not only is Temple Church within sight of our premises, its catacombs are connected to ours. Officially we will be going about our everyday professions from the Temple, but there will also be accommodation for adepts, novices, and guests, and of course for our servants, as well as several laboratories designed for alchemical purposes. We are glad to say that the slanders spread by Lord Alastair (see report of 2 December) have not succeeded in disrupting the good relations of Count Saint-Germain with the Prince of Wales and that, thanks to the patronage of His Highness, we have been able to acquire this complex of buildings. The solemn ceremony in which the secret documents of the Lodge are transferred from the hands of Count Saint-Germain to*

*the members of the Inner Circle is to take place in the  
Dragon Hall today.*

FROM *THE ANNALS OF THE GUARDIANS*

18 DECEMBER 1745

REPORT: SIR OLIVER NEWTON, INNER CIRCLE

## F O U R



IT TOOK ME a few seconds to get used to the different lighting conditions. The hall was lit only by an oil lamp on the table. The picture I saw by its warm but meager light was a comfortable still life: a basket, several balls of pink wool, a teapot with a felt tea cozy, and a cup decorated with roses. Also Lady Tilney, who was sitting on a chair doing crochet, and at the sight of me let her hands sink to her lap. She was obviously older than when we last met, with silver strands in her red hair, which had been neatly permed. All the same, she still had the same majestic, unapproachable look as my grandmother. And she didn't look in the least likely to scream or go for me brandishing her crochet hook.

"Happy Christmas," she said.

"Happy Christmas," I replied, slightly bewildered. For a moment I didn't know what to say next, but then I pulled myself together. "Don't worry, I'm not after some of your



blood or anything like that.” I stepped out of the shadow of the curtain.

“Oh, we settled all that business about the blood long ago, Gwyneth,” said Lady Tilney, with a touch of reproof in her voice, as if I ought to know exactly what she was talking about. “I’ve been wondering when you’d turn up again. Tea?”

“No, thank you. Look, I’m afraid I only have a few minutes.” I went a step closer and handed her the note. “My grandfather has to get this so that . . . well, so that everything will happen the way it did happen. It’s very important.”

“I understand.” Lady Tilney took the note and unfolded it at her leisure. She didn’t seem in the least annoyed.

“Why were you expecting me?” I asked.

“Because you told me not to be scared when you visited me. Unfortunately you didn’t say when that would be, so I’ve been waiting years and years for you to try scaring me.” She laughed quietly. “But making crochet pigs has a very soothing effect. To be honest, it easily sends you to sleep out of sheer boredom.”

I had a polite “It’s for a good cause, though,” on the tip of my tongue, but when I glanced at the basket, I exclaimed instead, “Oh, aren’t they cute!” And they really were. Much larger than I’d have expected, like real soft toys, and true to life.

“Take one,” said Lady Tilney.

“Do you mean it?” I thought of Caroline and put my hand into the basket. The pigs felt all soft and fluffy.

“Angora and cashmere wool,” said Lady Tilney with a touch of pride in her voice. “I never use any other. Most people crochet with sheep’s wool, but it’s so scratchy.”

“Er, yes. Thank you.” Clutching the little pink pig to my breast, I spent a moment pulling my thoughts together. Where had we been? I cleared my throat. “When do we meet next time? In the past, I mean?”

“That was 1912. Although it’s not next time from my point of view.” She sighed. “What exciting days those were—”

“Oh, hell!” My stomach was doing its roller-coaster ride again. Why on earth hadn’t we chosen a larger window of time? “Then anyway, you know more than I do,” I said hastily. “There’s no time to go into detail, but . . . maybe you can give me some good advice to help me?” I had taken a couple of steps back in the direction of the window, out of the circle of lamplight.

“Advice?”

“Yes. Well, something like: beware of . . . ?” I looked at her expectantly.

“Beware of what?” Lady Tilney looked back at me just as expectantly.

“That’s just what I don’t know! What *ought* I to beware of?”

“Pastrami sandwiches, for one thing, and too much sunlight. It’s bad for the complexion,” said Lady Tilney firmly—and then she blurred in front of my eyes and I was back in the year 1956.

Pastrami sandwiches, for heaven’s sake! I ought to

have asked *who* I ought to beware of, not *what*. But it was too late now. I'd lost the opportunity.

"What on earth is that?" cried Lucas, when he saw the piglet.

Yes, and instead of making use of every precious second to get information out of Lady Tilney, I'd been idiot enough to spend time on a pink soft toy. "It's a crochet pig, Grandfather, you can see it is," I said wearily. I was really disappointed in myself! "Angora and cashmere. Other people use scratchy sheep's wool."

"Our test seems to have worked, anyway," said Lucas, shaking his head. "You can use the chronograph, and we can make a date to meet. In my house."

"It was over much too quickly," I wailed. "I didn't find anything out."

"At least you have a . . . er, a pig, and Lady Tilney didn't have a heart attack. Or did she?"

I shook my head helplessly. "Of course not."

Lucas put the chronograph back in its velvet wrappings and took it over to the shrine. "Don't worry. This way we have enough time to smuggle you back down to the cellar and go on making plans while we wait for you to travel back. Although if that useless Cantrell has slept off his hangover, I don't know how we'll talk our way out of it this time."

I FELT positively euphoric when I finally landed back in the chronograph room in my own time. So maybe the trip to acquire the pink piglet (I'd stuffed it into my schoolbag)

hadn't brought much in the way of results, but Lucas and I had worked out a cunning plan. If the original chronograph really was in that chest, we wouldn't have to depend on chance anymore.

"Any special incidents?" Mr. Marley asked.

*Well, let's think: I've spent all afternoon conspiring with my grandfather, breaking all the rules. We read my blood into the chronograph, then we sent me back to the year 1852 to conspire with Lady Tilney.* Okay, I hadn't actually been conspiring with her, but it was a forbidden meeting all the same.

"The lightbulb in the cellar flickered now and then," I said, "and I learned French vocabulary by heart."

Mr. Marley bent over the journal, and in his neat, small handwriting, he actually did enter *1943 hours, the Ruby back from 1956, did her homework there, lightbulb flickered.* I suppressed a giggle. He had to keep such meticulous records of everything! I'd bet his star sign was Virgo. But it was later than I liked. I hoped Mum wouldn't send Lesley home before I was back.

However, Mr. Marley didn't seem to be in any hurry. He screwed the top back on his fountain pen infuriatingly slowly.

"I can find my own way out," I said.

"No, you mustn't," he said in alarm. "Of course I'll escort you to the limousine." Mr. Marley closed the journal and stood up. "And I have to blindfold you—you know I do."

Sighing, I let him tie the black scarf around my head. "I still don't understand why I'm not supposed to know

the way to this room.” Quite apart from the fact that I knew it perfectly well by now.

“Because that’s what it says in the *Annals*,” said Mr. Marley, sounding surprised.

“What?” I exclaimed. “My name’s in the *Annals*, and they say I mustn’t know the way here and back? Why not?”

Now Mr. Marley’s voice was distinctly uncomfortable. “Naturally your name isn’t there, or all these years the other Ruby, I mean Miss Charlotte, of course, wouldn’t have—” He cleared his throat, then fell silent, and I heard him opening the door. “Allow me,” he said, taking my arm. He led me out into the corridor. I couldn’t see him, but I felt sure he was blushing furiously again. I felt as if I were walking along beside a radiant heater.

“What exactly does it say about me there?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, but I really can’t . . . I’ve said too much already.” You could almost hear him wringing his hands, or at least the hand that wasn’t holding me. And this character claimed to be a descendant of the dangerous Rakoczy! What a joke!

“Please, *Leo*,” I said, sounding as friendly as I could.

“I’m sorry, but you won’t learn any more from me.” The heavy door latched behind us. Mr. Marley let go of my arm to lock it, which seemed to take a good ten minutes, while I tried to save a bit of time by taking a firm step forward, not too easy with my eyes blindfolded. Mr. Marley had grabbed my arm again, and a good thing, because without a pilot, I could have run straight into a wall down here. I decided to try flattering him. It couldn’t hurt.

Maybe he'd be prepared to come out with more information later.

"Did you know that I've met your ancestor in person?" In fact I'd even taken a photograph of him, but unfortunately I couldn't show it to Mr. Marley. He'd have told tales of me for bringing forbidden objects back from the past.

"Really? I envy you. The baron must have been an impressive personality."

"Er, yes, very impressive." You bet he was! That creepy old junkie! "He asked me about Transylvania, but unfortunately there wasn't much I could tell him about it."

"Yes, living in exile must have been hard for him," said Mr. Marley. Next moment, he let out a shrill "eek!"

A *rat*, I thought, and in panic I snatched the blindfold off. But it wasn't a rat that had made Mr. Marley squeal. It was Gideon. Still as unshaven as this afternoon, in fact more so, but with his eyes extremely bright and watchful. And looking so incredibly, outrageously, impossibly good.

"Only me," he said, smiling.

"I can see that," grouched Mr. Marley. "You scared me stiff."

Me too. My lower lip began trembling again, and I dug my teeth into it to keep the stupid thing still.

"You can go home now. I'll escort Gwyneth to the car," said Gideon, holding out his hand to me as if I was sure to take it.

I looked as haughty as you can with your front teeth

digging into your lower lip—probably I just looked like a beaver, if a haughty beaver—and ignored his hand.

“You can’t,” said Mr. Marley. “It’s my job to escort Miss Gwyneth to the—aargh!” He was staring at me in horror. “Oh, Miss Gwyneth, why did you take the scarf off? That’s against the rules.”

“I thought it was a rat you’d seen,” I said, casting a dark glance at Gideon. “And I wasn’t all that wrong, either.”

“Now look what you’ve done!” said Mr. Marley accusingly to Gideon. “I don’t know what I can . . . the rules say that . . . and if we—”

“Don’t be so uptight, Marley. Come on, Gwen, let’s go.”

“But you can’t. . . . I must insist that . . .,” stammered Mr. Marley. “And . . . and . . . and you have no right to tell me what to do—”

“Then go tell tales of me.” Gideon took my arm and simply hauled me on. I thought of resisting, but then I realized that would only lose me even more time. We’d probably still be standing here arguing tomorrow morning. So I let him lead me away, glancing back apologetically at Mr. Marley. “See you, Leo.”

“Yes, exactly. See you, Leo,” said Gideon.

“You . . . you haven’t heard the last of this,” stammered Mr. Marley, behind us. His face was shining like a beacon in the dark corridor.

“No, sure, we’re trembling with fright already.” Gideon didn’t seem to mind that Mr. Marley could still hear him as he added, “Stupid show-off.”

I waited until we had turned the next corner and then

shook myself free of his hand and quickened my pace until I was almost running.

“Ambitious to compete in the Olympic Games?” inquired Gideon.

I spun around to face him. “What do you want?” Lesley would have been proud of the way I spat that at him. “I’m in a hurry.”

“I only wanted to make sure you understood my apology this afternoon.” All the mockery had gone out of his voice now.

But not out of mine. “Yup, I did,” I snorted. “Which doesn’t mean I accepted it.”

“Gwen—”

“Okay, you don’t have to say you really like me again. Guess what, I liked you too. In fact, I liked you a lot. But that’s all over now.” I was running up the spiral staircase as fast as I could go, with the result that by the time I reached the top, I was right out of breath. I felt like hanging over the banisters gasping for air. But I wasn’t going to expose my weakness like that. Particularly as Gideon didn’t seem to have been exerting himself at all to keep up. So I hurried on, until he grabbed my wrist and made me stand still. I winced as his fingers pressed on my cut. It started bleeding again.

“It’s okay for you to hate me, really, I don’t have any problem with that,” said Gideon, looking seriously into my eyes. “But I’ve discovered things that make it necessary for you and me to work together. So that you . . . so that we’ll get out of all this alive.”



I tried to free myself, but he only held my wrist more firmly. “What sort of things?” I asked, although I would rather have shrieked, “Ouch!”

“I don’t know exactly, not yet. But it could turn out that I was wrong about Lucy and Paul and their intentions. So it’s important for you to—” He stopped, let go of me, and looked at the palm of his hand. “Is that *blood?*”

Damn. I mustn’t look guilty. “Nothing to speak of. I cut myself on the edge of a piece of paper at school this morning. So to stick to the subject. Until you can be more specific”—I felt really proud of coming out with that phrase!—“I’m definitely not working with you on anything.”

Gideon tried to take my arm again. “Here, that cut looks nasty. Let me look. . . . We’d better go to see Dr. White. He may still be in the building.”

“You probably mean you don’t want to say anything more precise about what you claim to have discovered.” I had my arm stretched right out, to keep him away and so that he couldn’t examine my wound.

“Because I’m not quite sure myself what to make of it yet,” said Gideon. And like Lucas just now, he added in a rather desperate tone of voice, “I need more time!”

“Who doesn’t?” I started off again. We had already reached Madame Rossini’s studio, and it wasn’t far from there to the front door. “Good-bye, Gideon. See you tomorrow—unfortunately.”

I was secretly waiting for him to grab me and hold me

back again, but he didn't. He didn't follow me, either. I'd have loved to see the expression on his face, but I didn't turn back to look at him. Anyway, that would have been a silly thing to do, because then he'd have seen the tears pouring down my cheeks once more.

NICK WAS WAITING at the front door of our house for me. "At last!" he said. "I wanted us to start without you, but Mr. Bernard said we ought to wait. He's made sure the flush of the toilet in the blue bathroom is out of order, so no one can use it, and he says he'll have to take out the tiles there to dismantle the cistern. We've bolted the secret door on the inside. Clever, eh?"

"Very clever."

"But Lady Arista and Aunt Glenda will be home in an hour's time, and they're sure to say he'd better put off the repair work until tomorrow."

"Then we'll have to hurry." I gave him a quick hug and dropped a kiss on his untidy red hair. There had to be time for that! "You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

Nick looked a little guilty. "Only Caroline. She was so . . . oh, well, you know how she always knows when there's something in the air, and she asked lots of questions. But she'll keep quiet and help us to throw Mum, Aunt Maddy, and Charlotte off the scent."

"Particularly Charlotte," I said, talking more to myself than Nick.

"They're all still upstairs in the dining room. Mum invited Lesley to stay to supper."

In the dining room, they were just leaving the table. Which meant that Aunt Maddy moved to her armchair by the fireplace and put her feet up while Mr. Bernard and Mum cleared the supper things away. They were all pleased to see me, all but Charlotte, that is. Oh, well, maybe she was just very good at hiding her delight.

Xemerius came down from the chandelier and cried, "There you are at last! I was nearly dying of boredom."

Although there was still a delicious smell of supper and Mum said she was keeping something hot for me, I heroically claimed that I wasn't hungry because I'd already had supper at the Temple. My stomach cramped indignantly at this shocking lie, but I couldn't possibly waste time satisfying its demands.

Lesley grinned at me. "It was a wonderful curry. I could hardly stop eating. My mum is in one of her terrible experimental phases right now. Even our dog won't eat the macrobiotic stuff she cooks these days."

"All the same, you look quite . . . well, let's say well nourished," said Charlotte sharply. She'd braided her hair and pinned it up again, but a few little locks had come loose and were framing her face very prettily. How could anyone look so beautiful and be so mean?

"You're lucky. I wish I had a dog, too," said Caroline. "Or any kind of pet."

"Never mind. We have Nick," said Charlotte. "That's almost like having a monkey."

"Not forgetting you, you nasty, poisonous spider!" said Nick.

“Well said, young man!” crowed Xemerius, back up on the chandelier. He clapped his paws.

Mum was helping Mr. Bernard to stack the dirty dishes in the dumbwaiter. “You know you can’t have a pet because Aunt Glenda’s allergic to animals, Caroline.”

“We could get a naked mole rat,” said Caroline. “That would be better than nothing.”

Charlotte opened her mouth and then shut it again, obviously because she couldn’t think of anything nasty to say about naked mole rats.

Aunt Maddy had made herself comfortable in her chair. She pointed sleepily to her round, rosy cheek. “Give your old great-aunt a kiss, Gwyneth. It’s a shame we see so little of you these days. Last night I had another dream about you, and I have to say it wasn’t a nice dream. . . .”

“Could you tell me about it later?” As I kissed her, I whispered in her ear, “And could you please help to keep Charlotte away from the blue bathroom?”

Aunt Maddy’s dimples deepened, and she winked at me. All of a sudden, she looked wide awake again.

Mum, who had a date to meet a friend of hers, was in a much better mood today than for the last few days. No worried expression, no exaggerated sighing when she looked at me. To my surprise, she even said Lesley could stay a bit longer and spared us the usual lecture on the dangers of traveling by bus at night. Even better, she said Nick could help Mr. Bernard to repair the lavatory cistern that was supposed to have gone wrong, however long it

took. Caroline was the only one out of luck. She was sent to bed. “But I want to be there when they discover the tr—when they dismantle the cistern,” she begged, holding back a tear when she couldn’t soften Mum’s heart.

“I’m going to bed now too,” Charlotte told Caroline. “With a good book.”

“*In the Shadow of Vampire Mountain*,” said Xemerius. “She’s reached page 413, where the young, although also undead, Christopher St. Ives finally gets beautiful Mary Lou into bed.”

I looked at him with amusement, and to my surprise, he suddenly seemed slightly embarrassed. “I only peeked at it, honest,” he said, jumping off the chandelier and down to the windowsill.

Aunt Maddy quickly moved in on Charlotte’s announcement. “Oh, my dear, I thought you might keep me company in the music room for a while,” she said. “I’d love a game of Scrabble.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “Last time we had to throw you out of the game because you insisted that there was such a word as *earcat*.”

“And so there is. It’s a cat with ears.” Aunt Maddy got up and took Charlotte’s arm. “But I don’t mind if you say it doesn’t count today.”

“Nor do *springbird* and *cowjuice*,” said Charlotte.

“Oh, but there’s definitely a *springbird*, darling,” said Aunt Maddy, winking at me again.

I hugged my mum before going up to my room with

Lesley. "And by the way, I'm to give you regards from Falk de Villiers. He wanted to know if you have a steady boyfriend."

I'd have done better to keep this message until Charlotte and Aunt Maddy had left the room, because they both stopped dead, rooted to the spot, and looked at Mum with great interest.

"What?" Mum blushed slightly. "And what did you tell him?"

"Well, I said it was ages since you'd been out with a man, and the last guy you did see regularly was always scratching himself when he thought no one was looking."

"You never said that!"

I laughed. "No, I didn't."

"Oh, are you two talking about that good-looking banker Arista wanted to marry you off to, Grace? Mr. Itchman," said Aunt Maddy. "Bet you he had lice or something."

Lesley giggled.

"His name was Hitchman, Aunt Maddy." My mother rubbed her arms, shivering. "A good thing I never got to find out for sure about the lice or whatever he had. What did you really tell him, then? Falk, I mean."

"Nothing," I said. "Want me to ask him next time I get the chance whether *he* has a steady girlfriend?"

"Don't you dare," said Mum. Then she grinned and added, "He doesn't. I happen to know that from a friend. She has a friend who knows him quite well . . . not that I'd be interested in any of that."

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“No, of course not!” said Xemerius. He flew off the windowsill and settled in the middle of the dining table. “Can we finally get a move on?”

HALF AN HOUR later, Lesley was up to date with the latest developments, and Caroline was the owner of a genuine vintage pink crochet piglet from the year 1929. When I told her where it came from, she was very impressed and said she was going to call her pig Margaret in honor of Lady Tilney. She dropped happily off to sleep cuddling the piglet when everything was quiet again.

Except for Mr. Bernard’s hammering and chiseling, of course. That could be heard all over the house. We’d never have managed to get any bricks out of the wall in secret. And Mr. Bernard and Nick didn’t get the little chest up to my room in secret either. Aunt Maddy came in right behind them.

“She caught us on the stairs,” said Nick apologetically.

“And she recognized that little chest at once,” said Aunt Maddy. She sounded excited. “Oh, it belonged to my brother Lucas! It stood in the library for years, and then—just before his death—it suddenly disappeared. So I think I have a right to know what you’re planning to do with it.”

Mr. Bernard sighed. “I’m afraid we had no choice,” he told me. “Lady Arista and Miss Glenda were coming home at that very moment.”

“Yes, so I was the lesser of two evils, right?” Aunt Maddy smiled with self-satisfaction.

“Just so long as Charlotte doesn’t know what was going on,” said Lesley.

“Don’t worry, she went to her room in a fury just because I put down the word *cardscissors*.”

“Which as everyone knows are scissors for cutting card,” said Xemerius. “Essential in every household.”

Aunt Maddy knelt beside the chest on the floor and stroked its dusty lid. “Wherever did you find it?”

Mr. Bernard looked inquiringly at me, and I shrugged my shoulders. Since she was here anyway, we might as well let her in on the whole story.

“I walled it up on your brother’s instructions,” said Mr. Bernard, with dignity. “That was on the evening before his death.”

“Only the evening before his death?” I echoed him. It was news to me too.

“And what’s in it?” Aunt Maddy wanted to know. She was standing up again, looking for somewhere to sit. Since she couldn’t see anywhere else, she sat down beside Lesley on the edge of my bed.

“Yes, that’s the vital question,” said Nick.

“The vital question,” said Mr. Bernard, “is how we’re going to open the chest. Because the key to it disappeared, along with Lord Montrose’s diaries, at the time of that burglary.”

“What burglary?” asked Lesley and Nick in chorus.

“Thieves broke in on the day of your grandfather’s funeral,” Aunt Maddy explained. “While we were all saying our last good-byes to him at the graveyard. Such a sad



day, wasn't it, dear Mr. Bernard?" she added, looking up at him. He was listening with no sign of emotion.

The story did seem vaguely familiar. As far as I remembered, the burglars had been disturbed and ran away before they could take anything. But when I told Nick and Lesley that, Aunt Maddy contradicted me.

"No, no, my little angel. The police only assumed that nothing had been stolen because all the ready cash, the deeds to this house, and valuable jewelry were still in the safe."

"And that made sense only if it was the diaries, and nothing else, that the burglars were after," said Mr. Bernard. "I allowed myself to put that hypothesis to the police at the time, but no one believed me. What's more, there was no sign that anyone had tried breaking into the safe. They'd have had to know the combination. So it was thought that Lord Montrose must have put his diaries somewhere else."

"I believed you, dear Mr. Bernard," said Aunt Maddy. "But I'm sorry to say that no one thought my opinion was worth much at the time. Or at any other time, really," she added wistfully. "Anyway, three days before Lucas died, I had a vision, and I was convinced that he hadn't died a natural death. But as usual, people thought I was crazy. Yet it was such a clear vision: a huge panther leaped at Lucas's chest and tore his throat to pieces."

"Oh, *very* clear," muttered Lesley, and I asked, "What about the diaries?"

"They never turned up," said Mr. Bernard. "Nor did

the key to this chest, which was with them, because Lord Montrose always kept it stuck inside his current diary, as I know because I saw it with my own eyes.”

Xemerius was flapping his wings impatiently. “Why don’t you stop all this nattering and fetch a crowbar?”

“But . . . but Grandpa had a heart attack,” said Nick.

“Well, that’s what it looked like after the event, anyway.” Aunt Maddy sighed deeply. “After all, he was eighty years old. He collapsed at his desk in his office at the Temple. My vision obviously wasn’t a good enough reason for them to have an autopsy done. Arista was very cross with me when I wanted her to insist.”

“This is giving me goose bumps,” whispered Nick, moving a little closer and snuggling up to me. For a while, no one said anything. Xemerius kept circling around the ceiling light saying, “Oh, get a move on!” But of course I was the only one who could hear him.

“That adds up to a lot of coincidences,” said Lesley at last.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Lucas has the chest walled up, and purely by chance, he dies next day.”

“Right, and purely by chance, I have a vision three days before his death,” said Aunt Maddy.

“And purely by chance, his diaries vanish without trace,” added Nick.

“And purely by chance,” said Mr. Bernard almost apologetically, “the key that Miss Lesley here is wearing on a chain around her neck is the very image of the key to this chest. I couldn’t help staring at it all through supper.”

Lesley put her hand to her chain, looking baffled. “What, this one? The key to my heart?”

“But that can’t be it,” I said. “I pinched it from a desk drawer in the Temple sometime in the eighteenth century. That would be rather too much of a coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Chance is the only legitimate ruler of the universe, as Einstein said. And he ought to know.” Aunt Maddy leaned forward to look at the key with interest.

“It wasn’t Einstein, it was Napoleon,” Xemerius called down from the ceiling. “And Napoleon didn’t have all his marbles at the time.”

“I could be wrong, of course. Old keys look very like one another,” said Mr. Bernard.

Lesley fiddled with the clasp of the chain and handed me the key. “It’s worth a try, anyway.”

I passed the key on to Mr. Bernard. The rest of us were holding our collective breath as he knelt by the chest and put the key into the delicate little lock. It turned easily.

“That’s amazing!” whispered Lesley.

Aunt Maddy nodded, satisfied. “You see, it’s not just chance and coincidence! It’s fate. And now, Mr. Bernard, don’t keep us in suspense any longer. Lift the lid.”

“Just a moment!” I took a deep breath. “It’s important for all of us here in this room to keep absolutely quiet about what’s inside the chest!”

Look how fast I’d caught the habit! Only a couple of days ago, I’d been grumbling about the Guardians and all their secrecy, and here I was, practically founding a secret

society of my own. All we needed was for me to say everyone must be blindfolded before leaving my room.

"Sounds like you already know what's in it," remarked Xemerius. He had already tried putting his head through the wood to see inside the chest several times, but he had withdrawn it again each time, coughing.

"Of course we won't breathe a word," said Nick, sounding slightly insulted, and Lesley and Aunt Maddy also looked quite indignant. There was even one eyebrow raised on Mr. Bernard's impassive face.

"Swear it," I demanded, and to make sure they realized how seriously I meant it, I added, "Swear by your lives!"

Aunt Maddy was the only one to jump up and put her hand enthusiastically on her heart. The others were still hesitating. "Can't we swear by anything else?" grumbled Lesley. "I'd have thought our left hands would do."

I shook my head. "Go on, swear it!"

"I swear by my life!" cried Aunt Maddy happily.

"I swear," murmured the others, rather embarrassed. Nick began giggling nervously, because Aunt Maddy had begun humming the national anthem to show what a solemn occasion it was.

When Mr. Bernard—glancing at me first, to make sure that I agreed—lifted the lid of the chest, it creaked slightly. He carefully unfolded several old velvet wrappings, and when he had finally revealed what was inside them, everyone but me went *ooh!* and *ah!* in surprise. Even Xemerius cried, "Wow, the cunning old devil!"

“Is that by any chance what I think it is?” asked Aunt Maddy after a while. Her eyes were still as round as saucers.

“Yes,” I said, pushing the hair back from my face. “It’s a chronograph.”

NICK AND AUNT MADDY had left reluctantly, Mr. Bernard inconspicuously, and Lesley only under protest. However, her mother had already rung her mobile twice to ask whether she had (a) by any chance been murdered, or was (b) lying hacked to pieces somewhere in Hyde Park, so really she had no choice.

First, however, she made *me* swear that I would stick strictly to our master plan. “By your life,” she demanded, and I went along with her. Although unlike Aunt Maddy, I spared her the national anthem.

At last my room was quiet again, and two hours later, after my mum had put her head around the door to look in on me, so was the whole house. I had struggled hard with myself, deciding whether to try the chronograph out right away or not. It wouldn’t make any difference to Lucas whether I traveled back to 1956 today, or tomorrow, or not for another four weeks. And a good night’s sleep for a change would probably work wonders for me. On the other hand, tomorrow I had to go to that ball and face Count Saint-Germain again, and I still didn’t know just what he was planning.

I went downstairs with the chronograph wrapped in

my dressing gown. “Why are you dragging that thing all around the house?” asked Xemerius. “You could simply travel back in time from your own room.”

“Yes, but how do I know who was sleeping there in 1956? And then I’d have to go all over the house, and I might be taken for a burglar again. No, I want to travel straight to the secret passage. Then I won’t risk being seen by someone when I land. Lucas will be waiting for me in front of Great-great-great-great-uncle Hugh’s portrait.”

“You get the number of greats different every time,” Xemerius pointed out. “If I were you, I’d just say *my fat forefather*.”

I ignored him and concentrated on the creaking steps on the stairs. A little later, I was pushing the portrait soundlessly aside—Mr. Bernard had oiled the mechanism, so it didn’t squeal. He had also fitted bolts to both the bathroom door and the door out to the stairs. I hesitated to bolt them both at first, because if for some reason I arrived outside the secret passage when I traveled back, I’d have shut myself out of the passage and the chronograph in to it.

“Cross your fingers and hope it works,” I told Xemerius when I finally knelt on the floor, pushed my forefinger into the little flap underneath the ruby, and pressed it firmly down on the needle. (By the way, you don’t get used to the pain. It hurts like hell every time.)

“I would if I had any,” Xemerius was saying—then he had disappeared, and the chronograph with him.

I took a deep breath, but the musty air in the corridor didn't really help me to get over the roller-coaster feeling. I stood up rather unsteadily, grasped Nick's flashlight more firmly, and opened the door out into the stairway. It was creaking and squealing again like something in a classic horror movie as the painting swung aside.

"Ah, there you are," whispered Lucas. He'd been waiting on the other side of it, and he was also armed with a flashlight. "For a split second I was afraid it might be a ghost appearing on the stroke of midnight—"

"In Peter Rabbit pajamas?"

"I had a drink or so earlier because . . . but I'm glad that I was right about the contents of the chest."

"Yes, and luckily the chronograph still works. We have an hour, as agreed."

"Then come along, quick, before he starts bawling again and wakes the whole house up."

"Before who starts bawling?" I whispered back in alarm.

"Little Harry, of course. He's getting teeth or something. Keeps on howling like a siren, anyway."

"Uncle Harry?"

"Arista says we have to leave him to cry for educational reasons or he'll grow up to be a wimp. But it's more than anyone can stand. Sometimes I go in to see him on the sly, wimp or no wimp. If you sing him 'The Fox Went Out on a Chilly Night,' he stops yelling."

"Poor Uncle Harry. Sounds like a classic case of early childhood imprinting, if you ask me." No wonder he was

so keen on shooting everything he could turn his sporting gun on these days—wild duck, stags, grouse, pheasants, and in particular, foxes. He was chairman of a society campaigning for it to be legal to hunt foxes with hounds again in Gloucestershire. “Maybe you ought to try singing him something else. And buy him a cuddly fox toy.”

We reached the library unnoticed, and when Lucas had closed the door and locked it behind us, he breathed a sigh of relief. “We made it!” The room itself was much the same as in my own time, except that the two armchairs by the fireplace had different covers, a Scottish plaid pattern in green and blue instead of the present cream roses on a moss-green background. There was a teapot on a warming plate on the little table between the chairs, plus two cups and—I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again it was true, it wasn’t a hallucination—there was a plate of sandwiches! Not dry biscuits, but real, nourishing sandwiches! I couldn’t believe it. Lucas dropped into one of the armchairs and pointed to the other one.

“Do sit down, and if you’re hungry, help yours—” But I already *had* helped myself. I was digging my teeth into the first sandwich.

“You’ve saved my life,” I said with my mouth full. Then something occurred to me. “They’re not pastrami sandwiches, I hope?”

“No, ham and cucumber,” said Lucas. “You look tired.”

“So do you.”

“I still haven’t quite recovered from all the excitement yesterday evening. Just now, like I told you, I had to have a



whisky. Well, two whiskies. But now two things are clear to me . . . yes, help yourself to another sandwich, and take the time to chew it properly. It's quite alarming to see you bolt them down like that."

"Carry on," I said. Oh, how good the food tasted! I felt I'd never in my life eaten such delicious sandwiches. "What two things are clear to you?"

"Well, first, good as it is to see you, our meetings must take place much farther in the future if they're to produce results. We should meet as close as possible to your date of birth. By then, perhaps I'll have understood what Lucy and Paul are planning and why, and I'll certainly know more than I do now. That means next time we meet should be in 1993. Then I'll also be able to help you over this business with the ball."

Yes, that sounded logical.

"And second, none of it will work unless I make my way much farther into the Guardians' center of power, right into the Inner Circle."

I nodded vigorously. I couldn't say anything because my mouth was too full.

"So far I haven't felt very keen on that kind of thing." Lucas glanced at the Montrose family's coat of arms hanging above the fireplace. A sword surrounded by roses, and under it the words *HIC RHODOS, HIC SALTA*, meaning something like "Show what you can really do."

"I certainly started out from a good position in the Lodge—after all, representatives of the Montrose family were among the founder members in 1745, and I'm also

married to a potential gene carrier from the Jade line. However, I didn't really intend to commit myself to the Lodge any more than necessary. . . . Well, that's all changed now. For you and Lucy and Paul, I'll go so far as to butter up Kenneth de Villiers. I don't know whether I'll succeed, but—"

"Oh, yes, you will! You'll even get to be Grand Master," I said, brushing crumbs off my pajamas. I only just managed to suppress a satisfied belch. It felt wonderful to have a full stomach again. "Let's think; in the year 1993, you'll be—"

"Ssh!" Lucas leaned forward and put a finger on my lips. "I don't want to hear it. Maybe it's not very sensible of me, but I don't want to know what the future has in store for me unless it will help where you're concerned. I have thirty-seven years to live before we meet again, and I'd like to spend them as . . . well, as free of anxiety as possible. Can you understand that?"

"Yes." I looked at him sadly. "Yes, I can understand it very well." In the circumstances, it probably wasn't a good idea to tell him that Aunt Maddy and Mr. Bernard suspected he hadn't died a natural death. I could always warn him about that when we met in 1993.

I leaned back in my chair and tried to smile. "Then let's talk about the magic of the raven, Grandpa. Because there's something you don't yet know about me."