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KERSTIN GIER

RUBY RED

*Translated from the German
by Anthea Bell*



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with Gideon, who shares the gift, through historical London trying to
discover who they can trust.

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*For Elk, Dolphin, and Owl,
who kept me company while I was writing,
and for a little red double-decker bus
that made me happy at just
the right moment*



PROLOGUE

Hyde Park, London

8 April 1912

AS SHE FELL to her knees and burst into tears, he looked all around the park. Just as he'd expected, it was empty at this early hour. Jogging wouldn't be fashionable for a long time yet, and it was too cold for the beggars who slept on park benches with nothing but newspaper over them.

He carefully wrapped the chronograph in its cloth and slipped it into his backpack.

She was huddled beside one of the trees on the north bank of the Serpentine, on a carpet of faded crocuses.

Her shoulders were shaking, and her sobs sounded like the desperate cries of an injured animal. He could hardly bear it. But he knew from experience that it was better to leave her alone. So he sat down beside her in the dew-covered grass, gazed at the smooth surface of the water, and waited.

"Have tissues been invented yet?" she finally sniffed, turning her tearstained face to him.

"No idea," he said. "But I can offer you a monogrammed hanky—dead right for this period."

"G.M. Did you pinch it from Grace?"

"She gave it to me, don't worry. You can blow your nose on it all you like, Princess."

She smiled wryly as she handed him the handkerchief. "Now it's ruined. Sorry about that."

"Oh, never mind!" he said. "Just so long as you've stopped crying."

Tears shot straight back into her eyes. "We shouldn't have abandoned her. She needs us! We've no idea if our bluff will work . . . and no chance of ever finding out now."

"We'd have been even less use to her dead."

"If we could only have hidden away with her somewhere far off, under other names, until she was old enough to—"

He interrupted her, shaking his head firmly. "They'd have found us anywhere we went; we've discussed that a thousand times already. We didn't abandon her. We did the only right thing: we made it possible for her to live in safety. At least for the next sixteen years."

For a moment she said nothing. Somewhere in the distance a horse whinnied, and voices drifted over from West Carriage Drive, although it was nearly dark now.

"I know you're right," she said at last. "It just hurts so much to know we'll never see her again." She gently rubbed her red-rimmed eyes. "At least we're not going to

be bored. Sooner or later they'll track us down, even here, and set the Guardians on us. He's not about to give up either the chronograph or his plans, not without a fight."

He smiled, seeing the light of adventure come back into her eyes. "Maybe we'll outwit him after all. Either that, or in the end the other device won't work. Then he'll be finished."

"Right. But if it does work, we're the only ones who can stop him."

"That's just why we've done the right thing." He stood up and brushed the earth off his jeans. "Come on! This damn grass is wet, and you're supposed to be taking things easy."

She let him pull her to her feet and kiss her. "What are we going to do now? Look for a place to hide the chronograph?" she asked, looking undecidedly at the bridge separating Hyde Park from Kensington Gardens.

"Yes, but first let's raid the Guardians' deposits and stock up with cash. Then we could take the train to Southampton. The *Titanic* leaves on Wednesday. For her maiden voyage."

She laughed. "So that's your idea of taking things easy! But right, I'm with you!"

He was so glad she could laugh again that he kissed her once more. "I was really thinking. . . . You know that out at sea a ship's captain can marry people, don't you, Princess?"

"You want to marry me? On board the *Titanic*? Are you out of your mind?"

"It would be so romantic."

"Except the bit with the iceberg." She laid her head on his chest and buried her face in his jacket. "I love you so much," she murmured.

"Will you be my wife?"

"Yes," she said, her face still buried against his chest. "But only if we leave the ship in Queenstown, Ireland, at the latest."

"Ready for the next adventure, Princess?"

"Ready when you are," she said softly.



Uncontrolled time travel usually announces itself a few minutes in advance, but sometimes hours or even days ahead. The symptoms are sensations of vertigo in the head, stomach, and/or legs. Many gene carriers also speak of a headache similar to migraine.

The first journey back in time—also known as the initiation journey—takes place between the sixteenth and seventeenth years of the gene carrier's life.

FROM *THE CHRONICLES OF THE GUARDIANS*,
VOLUME 2: *GENERAL LAWS OF TIME TRAVEL*

ONE



I FIRST FELT IT in the school canteen on Monday morning. For a moment it was like being on a roller coaster when you're racing down from the very top. It lasted only two seconds, but that was long enough for me to dump a plateful of mashed potatoes and gravy all over my school uniform. I managed to catch the plate just in time, as my knife and fork clattered to the floor.

"This stuff tastes like it's been scraped off the floor anyway," said my friend Lesley while I mopped up the damage as well as I could. Of course everyone was looking at me. "You can have mine too, if you fancy spreading some more on your blouse."

"No thanks." As it happens, the blouse of the St. Lennox High School uniform was pretty much the color of mashed potatoes anyway, but you still couldn't miss seeing the remaining globs of my lunch. I buttoned up my dark blue blazer over it.

"There goes Gwenny, playing with her food again!" said Cynthia Dale. "Don't you sit next to me, you mucky pup."

"As if I'd ever sit next to you of my own free will, Cyn." It's a fact, I'm afraid, that I did quite often have little accidents with school lunches. Only last week my pudding had hopped out of its dish and landed a few feet away, right in a Year Seven boy's spaghetti carbonara. The week before that I'd knocked my cranberry juice over, and everyone at our table was splashed. They looked as if they had measles. And I really couldn't count the number of times the stupid tie that's part of our school uniform had been drenched in sauce, juice, or milk.

Only I'd never felt dizzy at the same time before.

But I was probably just imagining it. There'd been too much talk at home recently about dizzy feelings.

Not mine, though: my cousin Charlotte's dizzy spells. Charlotte, beautiful and immaculate as ever, was sitting right there next to Cynthia, gracefully scooping mashed potatoes into her delicate mouth.

The entire family was on tenterhooks, waiting for Charlotte to have a dizzy fit. On most days, my grandmother, Lady Arista, asked Charlotte how she was feeling every ten minutes. My aunt Glenda, Charlotte's mother, filled the ten-minute gap by asking the same thing in between Lady Arista's interrogations.

And whenever Charlotte said that she didn't feel dizzy, Lady Arista's lips tightened and Aunt Glenda sighed. Or sometimes the other way around.

The rest of us—my mum, my sister Caroline, my brother Nick, and Great-aunt Maddy—rolled our eyes. Of course it was exciting to have someone with a time-travel gene in the family, but as the days went by, the excitement kind of wore off. Sometimes we felt that all the fuss being made over Charlotte was just too much.

Charlotte herself usually hid her feelings behind a mysterious Mona Lisa smile. In her place, I wouldn't have known whether to be excited or worried if dizzy feelings failed to show up. Well, to be honest, I'd probably have been pleased. I was more the timid sort. I liked peace and quiet.

"Something will happen sooner or later," Lady Arista said every day. "And we must be ready."

Sure enough, something did happen after lunch, in Mr. Whitman's history class. I'd left the canteen feeling hungry. I'd found a black hair in my dessert—apple crumble with custard—and I couldn't be sure if it was one of my own hairs or a lunch lady's. Anyway, I didn't fancy the crumble after that.

Mr. Whitman gave us back the history test we'd taken last week. "You obviously prepared well for it. Especially Charlotte. An A-plus for you, Charlotte."

Charlotte stroked a strand of her glossy red hair back from her face and said, "Oh, my!" as if the result came as a surprise to her. Even though she always had top marks in everything.

But Lesley and I were pleased with our own grades this time, too. We each had an A-minus, although our

“preparation” had consisted of eating crisps and ice cream while we watched Cate Blanchett in *Elizabeth* and then *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* on DVD. We did pay attention in history class, though, which I’m afraid couldn’t be said for all our other courses.

Mr. Whitman’s classes were so intriguing that you couldn’t help listening. Mr. Whitman himself was also very interesting. Most of the girls were secretly—or not so secretly—in love with him. So was our geography teacher, Mrs. Counter. She went bright red whenever Mr. Whitman passed her. And he *was* terribly good-looking. All the girls thought so, except Lesley. She thought Mr. Whitman looked like a cartoon squirrel.

“Whenever he looks at me with those big brown eyes, I feel like giving him a nut,” she said. She even started calling the squirrels running around in the park Mr. Whitmans. The silly thing is that somehow it was infectious, and now, whenever a squirrel scuttled past me, I always said, “Oh, look at that cute, fat little Mr. Whitman!”

I’m sure it was the squirrel business that made Lesley and me the only girls in the class who weren’t crazy about Mr. Whitman. I kept trying to fall in love with him (if only because the boys in our class were all somehow totally childish), but it was no good. The squirrel comparison had lodged itself in my mind and wouldn’t go away. I mean, how can you feel romantic about a squirrel?

Cynthia had started the rumor that when he was studying, Mr. Whitman had worked as a male model on the side. By way of evidence, she’d cut an ad out of a glossy

magazine, with a picture showing a man not unlike Mr. Whitman lathering himself with shower gel.

Apart from Cynthia, however, no one thought Mr. Whitman was the man in the shower-gel ad. The model had a dimple in his chin, and Mr. Whitman didn't.

The boys in our class didn't think Mr. Whitman was so great. Gordon Gelderman, in particular, couldn't stand him. Because before Mr. Whitman came to teach in our school, all the girls in our class were in love with Gordon. Including me, I have to admit, but I was only eleven at the time and Gordon was still quite cute. Now, at sixteen, he was just stupid. And his voice had been in a permanent state of breaking for the last two years. Unfortunately, the mixture of squealing and growling still didn't keep him from spewing nonsense all the time.

He got very upset about getting an F on the history test. "That's discrimination, Mr. Whitman. I deserve a B at least. You can't give me bad marks just because I'm a boy."

Mr. Whitman took Gordon's test back from him, turned a page, and read out, "Elizabeth I was so ugly that she couldn't get a husband. So everyone called her the Ugly Virgin."

The class giggled.

"Well? I'm right, aren't I?" Gordon defended himself. "I mean, look at her pop-eyes and her thin lips and that weird hairstyle."

We'd gone to study the pictures of the Tudors in the National Portrait Gallery, and in those paintings, sure enough, Queen Elizabeth I didn't look much like Cate

Blanchett. But first, maybe people in those days thought thin lips and big noses were the last word in chic, and second, her clothes were really wonderful. Third, no, Elizabeth I didn't have a husband, but she had a lot of affairs, among them one with Sir . . . oh, what was his name? Anyway, Clive Owen played him in the second film with Cate Blanchett.

"She was known as the Virgin Queen," Mr. Whitman told Gordon, "because . . ." He paused and looked anxiously at Charlotte. "Are you feeling all right, Charlotte? Do you have a headache?"

Everyone looked at Charlotte, who had her head in her hands. "I feel . . . I just feel dizzy," she said, looking at me. "Everything's going round and round."

I took a deep breath. So here we go, I thought. Lady Arista and Aunt Glenda would be over the moon.

"Wow, cool," whispered Lesley. "Is she going to turn all transparent now?" Although Lady Arista had repeatedly told us that under no circumstances were we ever to tell any outsider what was special about our family, I'd decided to ignore the ban when it came to Lesley. After all, she was my very best friend, and best friends don't have secrets from each other.

Since I'd known Charlotte (which in fact was all my life), she'd always seemed somewhat helpless. But I knew what to do. Goodness knows Aunt Glenda had told me often enough.

"I'll take Charlotte home," I told Mr. Whitman, as I stood up. "If that's okay."

Mr. Whitman's gaze was fixed on Charlotte. "I think that's a good idea, Gwyneth," he said. "I hope you feel better soon, Charlotte."

"Thanks," said Charlotte. On the way to the door, she swayed slightly. "Coming, Gwenny?"

I grabbed her arm. For the first time I felt quite important to Charlotte. It was a nice feeling to be needed for a change.

"Don't forget to phone and tell me all about it," Lesley whispered as we passed her.

Feeling slightly better outside the classroom, Charlotte wanted to fetch some things from her locker, but I held her firmly by the sleeve. "Not now, Charlotte! We have to get home as fast as possible. Lady Arista says—"

"It's gone again," said Charlotte.

"So? It could come back any moment." Charlotte let me steer her the other way. "Where did I put that chalk?" As we walked on, I searched my jacket pocket. "Oh, good, here it is. And my mobile. Shall I call home? Are you scared? Silly question, sorry. I'm so excited."

"It's okay. No, I'm not scared."

I glanced sideways at her to check whether she was telling the truth. She had that snooty little Mona Lisa smile on her face. You could never tell what she was hiding behind it.

"Well, *shall* I call home?"

"What use would that be?" Charlotte replied.

"I just figured—"

"You can leave the thinking to me, don't worry," said Charlotte.

We went down the stone steps to the place where James always sat. He rose to his feet when he saw us, but I just smiled at him. The trouble with James was that no one else could see or hear him—only me.

James was a ghost. Which is why I avoided talking to him when other people were around, except for Lesley. She'd never doubted James's existence for a second. Lesley believed everything I said, and that was one of the reasons she was my best friend. She was only sorry she couldn't see and hear James herself.

But I was glad of it, because when James first set eyes on Lesley, he said, "Good heavens above, the poor child has more freckles than there are stars in the sky! If she doesn't start using a good bleaching lotion at once, she'll never catch herself a husband!"

Whereas the first thing Lesley said when I introduced them to each other was "Ask him if he ever buried treasure anywhere."

Unfortunately James was not the treasure-burying type, and he was rather insulted that Lesley thought he might be. He was easily insulted.

"Is he transparent?" Lesley had asked at that first meeting. "Or kind of black and white?"

James looked just like anyone I'd ever met. Except for his clothes, of course.

"Can you walk through him?"

"I don't know. I've never tried."

"Then try now," Lesley suggested.

James was not about to let me try that.

“What does she mean, a ghost? The Honorable James Augustus Peregrine Pympoole-Bothame, heir to the fourteenth Earl of Hardsdale, is taking no insults from young girls!”

Like so many ghosts, he refused to accept that he wasn't alive anymore. Try as he might, he couldn't remember dying. James and I had met five years ago, on my first day at St. Lennox High School, but to James it seemed only a few days ago that he was sitting in his club playing cards with friends and talking about horses, beauty spots, and wigs. (He wore both a beauty spot and a wig, but they looked better on him than you might think.) He completely ignored the fact that I'd grown several inches since we first met, had acquired breasts, and braces on my teeth, and had shed the braces again. He dismissed the fact that his father's grand town house had become a school with running water, electric light, and central heating. The only thing he did seem to notice from time to time was the ever-decreasing length of our school uniform skirts. Obviously girls' legs and ankles hadn't often been on show in his time.

“It's not very civil of a lady to walk past a highborn gentleman without a word, Miss Gwyneth,” he called after me now. He was deeply offended that I'd brushed past him.

“Sorry. We're in a hurry,” I said.

“If I can help you in any way, I am, of course, entirely at your service,” James said, adjusting the lace on his cuffs.

“I don't think so, but thanks anyway. We just have to

get home, fast.” As if James could possibly have helped in any way! He couldn’t even open a door. “Charlotte isn’t feeling well,” I explained.

“I’m very sorry to hear it,” said James, who had a soft spot for Charlotte. Unlike “that ill-mannered girl with the freckles,” as he called Lesley, he thought my cousin was “delightful, a vision of beguiling charm.” Now he offered more of his flowery flattery. “Pray give her my best wishes. And tell her she looks as enchanting as ever. A little pale, but as captivating as a fairy.”

“I’ll tell her,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“If you don’t stop talking to your imaginary friend,” snapped Charlotte, “you’ll end up in the nuthouse.”

Okay, then I *wouldn’t* tell her. She was conceited enough as it was.

“James isn’t imaginary, just invisible. There’s a great difference.”

“If you say so,” replied Charlotte. She and Aunt Glenda thought I just made up James and the other ghosts for attention. Now I was sorry I’d ever told Charlotte about them. As a small child, though, I couldn’t manage to keep my mouth shut about gargoyles coming to life—scrambling down the fronts of buildings before my very eyes and twisting their Gothic faces for me to see. The gargoyles were funny, but there were also some dark, grim-looking ghosts, and I was afraid of those. It took me a couple of years to realize that ghosts can’t hurt you. All they can really do to people is scare them.

Not James, of course. He was not frightening in the least.

“Lesley thinks it may be a good thing that James died young. With a name like Pympoole-Bothame, how would he ever have found a wife?” I said, after making sure James was out of hearing distance. “I mean, who’d marry a man with a name that sounds like Pimple-Bottom?”

Charlotte rolled her eyes.

“He’s not bad-looking,” I went on. “And he’s filthy rich too—if he’s telling the truth about his family. It’s just his habit of raising a perfumed lace hanky to his nose that doesn’t exactly make me swoon.”

“What a shame there’s no one but you to admire him,” said Charlotte.

I thought so myself.

“And how stupid of you to talk about how weird you are outside the family,” added Charlotte.

That was another of Charlotte’s typical digs. It was meant to hurt me, and as a matter of fact, it did.

“I’m not weird!”

“Of course you are!”

“You’re a fine one to talk, *gene carrier*!”

“Well, I don’t go blabbing on about it all over the place,” said Charlotte. “You’re like Great-aunt Mad Maddy. She even tells the postman about her visions.”

“You’re a jerk.”

“And you’re naive.”

Still quarreling, we walked through the front hall,

past the janitor's glazed cubicle, and out into the school yard. The wind was picking up, and the ominous sky held the promise of rain. I wished we had grabbed our coats from our lockers.

"Sorry I said that about you being like Great-aunt Maddy," said Charlotte, suddenly sounding remorseful. "I'm excited, but I am a bit nervous as well."

I was surprised. Charlotte never apologized.

"I know," I replied almost too quickly. I wanted her to know that I appreciated her apology. But in reality, I couldn't have been further from understanding how she felt. I'd have been scared out of my wits. In her shoes, I'd have been about as excited as if I were going to the dentist. "Anyway, I like Great-aunt Maddy," I added. That was true. Great-aunt Maddy might be a bit talkative and inclined to say everything four times over, but I liked that a lot better than the mysterious way the others carried on. And Great-aunt Maddy was always very generous when it came to handing out sherbet lemons.

But of course Charlotte didn't like sweets.

We crossed the road and hurried on along the pavement.

"Don't keep glancing at me sideways like that," said Charlotte. "You'll notice if I disappear, don't worry. Then you'll have to make your silly chalk mark on the pavement and hurry on home. But it's not going to happen. Not today."

"How can you know? And don't you wonder where you'll end up? I mean, *when* you'll end up?"

"Yes, of course I do," said Charlotte.

"Let's hope it's not in the middle of the Great Fire of 1664."

"The Great Fire of London was in 1666," said Charlotte. "That's easy to remember. And at the time this part of the city wasn't built up yet, so there'd have been hardly anything to burn here."

Did I say that Charlotte was also known as Spoilsport and Miss Know-it-all?

But I wasn't dropping the subject. It may have been mean of me, but I wanted to wipe the silly smile off her face, if only for a couple of seconds. "These school uniforms would probably burn like tinder," I said casually.

"I'd know what to do" was all Charlotte said, still smiling.

I hated myself for admiring how cool she was right now. To me, the idea of suddenly landing in the past was totally terrifying.

The past would have been awful, no matter what period you landed in. There was always some horrible thing lurking there—war, smallpox, the plague. If you said the wrong thing, you could be burnt as a witch. Plus, everyone had fleas, and you had to use chamber pots, which were tipped out of upstairs windows in the morning—even if someone was walking along the street below.

But Charlotte had been carefully prepared to find her way around in the past from the time she should have been rocking dolls in her elegant arms. She'd never had

time to play or make friends, go shopping, go to the cinema, or date boys. Instead she'd been taught dancing, fencing, and riding, foreign languages, and history. And since last year she'd been going out every Wednesday afternoon with Lady Arista and Aunt Glenda, and they didn't come home until late in the evening. They called it an introduction to the mysteries. But no one—especially not Charlotte—would say what kind of mysteries.

Her first sentence when she learnt to talk had probably been "It's a secret." Closely followed by "That's none of your business."

Lesley always said our family must have more secrets than MI5 and MI6 put together. She was probably right.

Normally we took the bus home from school. The number 8 stopped in Berkeley Square, and it wasn't far from there to our house. Today we went the four stops on foot, as Aunt Glenda had told us we should when Charlotte had a dizzy spell. I kept my bit of chalk at the ready the whole time, but Charlotte never disappeared.

As we went up the steps to our front door, I was somewhat disappointed, because this was where my part in the ordeal came to an end. Now my grandmother would take over, and I would once again be exiled from the world of mysteries.

I tugged at Charlotte's sleeve. "Look! The man in black is there again."

"So?" Charlotte didn't even look around. The man was standing in the entrance of number 18, opposite. As usual, he wore a black trench coat and a hat pulled right down

over his face. I'd taken him for a ghost until I realized that Nick, Caroline, and Lesley could see him too.

He'd been keeping watch on our house almost around the clock for months. Or maybe there were several men who looked exactly the same taking turns. We argued about whether the man was a burglar casing the joint, a private detective, or a wicked magician. That last one was my sister's theory, and she firmly believed in it. Caroline was nine and loved stories about wicked magicians and good fairies. My brother, Nick, was twelve and thought stories about magicians and fairies were silly, so he figured the man must be a burglar. Lesley and I backed the private detective.

If we tried to cross the road for a closer look at the man, he would either disappear into the building behind him or slip into a black Bentley, which was always parked by the curb, and drive away.

"It's a magic car," Caroline claimed. "It turns into a raven when no one's looking. And the magician turns into a tiny little man and rides through the air on the raven's back."

Nick had made a note of the Bentley's license plate, just in case. "Although they're sure to paint the car after the burglary and fit a new license plate," he said.

The grown-ups acted as if they saw nothing suspicious about being watched day and night by a man wearing a hat and dressed entirely in black.

Nor did Charlotte. "What's biting you lot about the poor man? He's just standing there to smoke a cigarette, that's all."

"Oh, really?" I was more likely to believe the story about the enchanted raven.

It had started raining. We reached home not a moment too soon.

"Do you at least feel dizzy again?" I asked as we waited for the door to be opened. We didn't have our own front-door keys.

"Just leave me alone," said Charlotte. "It will happen when the time comes."

Mr. Bernard opened the door for us. Lesley said Mr. Bernard was our butler and the ultimate proof that we were almost as rich as the Queen or Madonna. But I didn't know exactly who or what Mr. Bernard really was. To Mum, he was "Grandmother's lackey," but Lady Arista called him "an old family friend." To Caroline and Nick and me, he was simply Lady Arista's rather weird manservant.

At the sight of us, his eyebrows shot up.

"Hello, Mr. Bernard," I said. "Nasty weather."

"Very nasty." With his hooked nose and brown eyes behind his round, gold-rimmed glasses, Mr. Bernard always reminded me of an owl. "You really ought to wear your coats when you leave the house on a day like this."

"Er . . . yes, we ought to," I said.

"Where's Lady Arista?" asked Charlotte. She was never particularly polite to Mr. Bernard. Perhaps because, unlike the rest of us, she hadn't felt any awe of him when she was a child. Although, and this really was awe-inspiring, he seemed able to materialize out of nowhere right behind you in any part of the house, moving as quietly as a cat.

Nothing got past Mr. Bernard, and he always seemed to be on the alert for something.

Mr. Bernard had been with us since before I was born, and Mum said he had been there when *she* was still a little girl. That made Mr. Bernard almost as old as Lady Arista, even if he didn't look it. He had his own rooms on the second floor, with a separate corridor in which we children were forbidden even to set foot.

My brother, Nick, said Mr. Bernard had built-in trapdoors and elaborate alarm systems up there, so that he could watch out for unwelcome visitors, but Nick couldn't prove it. None of us had ever dared to venture into the out-of-bounds area.

"Mr. Bernard needs his privacy," Lady Arista often said.

"How right," said Mum. "I think we could all of us do with some of that." But she said it so quietly that Lady Arista didn't hear her.

"Your grandmother is in the music room," Mr. Bernard informed Charlotte.

"Thank you." Charlotte left us in the hall and went upstairs. The music room was on the first floor, and no one knew why it was called that. There wasn't even a piano in it.

The music room was Lady Arista's and Great-aunt Maddy's favorite place. It smelled of faded violet perfume and the stale smoke of Lady Arista's cigarillos. The stuffy room wasn't aired nearly often enough, and staying in it for too long made you feel drowsy.

Mr. Bernard closed the front door. I took one more quick look past him at the other side of the street. The

man with the hat was still there. Was I wrong, or was he just raising his hand almost as if he were waving to someone? Mr. Bernard, maybe, or even me?

The door closed, and I couldn't follow that train of thought any longer because my stomach suddenly flipped again, as if I were on a roller coaster. Everything blurred before my eyes. My knees gave way, and I had to lean against the wall to keep from falling down.

But as quickly as it had come on, the feeling was gone.

My heart was thumping like crazy. There must be something wrong with me. Without being on an actual carnival ride, you couldn't possibly feel dizzy this often without something being terribly wrong.

Unless . . . oh, nonsense! I was probably just growing too fast. Or I had . . . I had a brain tumor? Or maybe, I thought, brushing that nasty notion aside, it was only that I was hungry.

Yes, that must be it. I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. My lunch had landed on my blouse. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Only then did I notice Mr. Bernard's owlish eyes looking attentively at me.

"Whoops," he said, a little too late.

I felt myself blushing. "I'll . . . I'll go and do my homework," I muttered.

Mr. Bernard just nodded casually. But as I climbed the stairs, I could feel his eyes on my back.



Back from Durham, where I visited Lord Montrose's younger daughter, Grace Shepherd, whose daughter was unexpectedly born the day before yesterday. We are all delighted to record the birth of

Gwyneth Sophie Elizabeth Shepherd

5 lbs 8 oz., 20 in.

Mother and child both doing well.

Heartfelt congratulations to our Grand Master on the birth of his fifth grandchild.

FROM *THE ANNALS OF THE GUARDIANS*

10 OCTOBER 1994

REPORT: THOMAS GEORGE, INNER CIRCLE

TWO



LESLEY SAID OUR HOUSE was posh as a palace because it was so big and full of paintings, wooden paneling, and antique furniture. She suspected that there was a secret passage behind every wall and at least one hidden compartment in every cupboard. When we were younger, we went on journeys of exploration through the house whenever Lesley came to visit. We were strictly forbidden to snoop around, which made it even more exciting. We worked out increasingly crafty strategies for not getting caught. In the course of time we really did find some secret compartments, and even a secret door. It was in the stairwell behind an oil painting of a fierce-looking fat, bearded man who was sitting, with his sword drawn, atop a great white horse.

According to Great-aunt Maddy, the fierce man was my great-great-great-great-great-uncle Hugh sitting on his

bay mare, Fat Annie. The door behind the picture hid only a few steps that led down to a rather unimpressive bathroom, but the fact that it was a secret passage made it exciting—well, to Lesley and me anyway.

“You’re just so lucky to live here!” Lesley always said.

Personally, I thought Lesley was the lucky one. She lived with her mother and father and a shaggy dog called Bertie in a comfortable house with a cozy garden in North Kensington. There were no secrets there, no mysterious servants, and no relatives to get on your nerves all the time.

We used to live in a house like that ourselves: my mum, my dad, Nick, Caroline, and me. A little house in Durham, in the north of England. But then my dad died. Caroline was just six months old when Mum decided to move us all to London. Probably because she felt lonely. And maybe she was short of money as well.

Mum had grown up in this house herself, along with her sister, Glenda, and her brother, Harry. Uncle Harry was the only one who didn’t live in London now. He lived in Gloucestershire, with his wife.

At first the house had looked like a palace to me too. But when you have to share a palace with a big, annoying family, it doesn’t seem quite so big after a while. Even though there were a lot of unnecessary rooms that didn’t get used, like the ballroom on the first floor stretching the entire breadth of the house.

The ballroom would have been a great place for roller-skating, only we weren’t allowed to. It was lovely, with its

tall windows, its stucco ceiling, and all those chandeliers, but there's never been a ball there, or not in my lifetime, not even a big party.

The only things that did happen in the ballroom were Charlotte's dancing and fencing lessons. The musicians' gallery, which you reached by climbing up steps from the front hall, was also totally useless, except maybe for Caroline and her friends, who used the dark corner under the stairs when they were playing hide-and-seek.

My mum, my brother and sister, and I lived on the third floor, just under the roof, where a lot of the walls were slanted, but there were two little balconies. We each had a cozy little room of our own. Charlotte was envious of our big bathroom, because the second-floor bathroom had no windows at all, but ours had two. Another reason I liked our floor was that Mum, Nick, Caroline, and I had it all to ourselves, which was often a blessing in that madhouse.

The only disadvantage was that we were miles away from the kitchen, I noted as I gloomily climbed the stairs. I should have grabbed myself an apple to bring up. I'd have to make do with butter cookies from the stock Mum kept in reserve on our floor.

I was so afraid the dizzy feeling would come back that I stuffed eleven cookies into my mouth, one after another. Then I took off my shoes and my jacket, sat down on the sewing room sofa, and stretched out flat on my back.

It had been such a strange day. I mean, even stranger than usual.

It was only two o'clock. At least another two and a

half hours before I could call Lesley and tell her all about it. My brother and sister wouldn't be home from school until four, and Mum worked until five. Normally I loved being alone on our floor of the house. I could take a bath in peace without anyone knocking on the door, desperate to go to the loo. I could turn up the music and sing along at the top of my voice without anyone laughing. And I could watch what I liked on TV without anyone whining, "But it's going to be *Sponge Bob* in a minute."

But I didn't feel like doing any of that today. I didn't even feel like taking a little nap. Far from it. The sofa, which was usually a sanctuary, felt like a wobbly raft on a torrential river. I was afraid I might be washed away on it the moment I closed my eyes.

Trying to turn my mind to something else, I stood up and began tidying the sewing room a bit. It was kind of our own, unofficial living room, because luckily neither the aunts nor my grandmother ever came up to the third floor. There wasn't a sewing machine here either, but there was a narrow flight of steps leading up to the roof. These were originally meant for a chimney sweep, but now it was Lesley and I who used them. The roof was one of our favorite places.

Of course it was a little risky, because there was no balustrade, just a decorative knee-high galvanized iron border along the ledge, but you didn't actually *have* to practice long jump up there, or dance all the way to the edge of the drop. The key to the door was kept in a rose-patterned sugar bowl. No one in my family knew that *I* knew its hiding

place, or you can bet all hell would have broken loose. That was why I always made sure no one saw me sneaking up to the roof. You could sunbathe there, or simply hide away if you wanted to be left in peace. Which, like I said, I often did want, only not just this minute.

I folded our blankets neatly, swept cookie crumbs off the sofa, plumped up the cushions, and put a set of chessmen scattered about the place back into their box. I even watered the azalea standing in a pot on the bureau in the corner and wiped down the coffee table with a damp cloth. Then I looked around the now spotlessly tidy room, wondering what to do next. Just ten minutes had passed, and I wanted company even more than before.

Was Charlotte having a dizzy spell again down in the music room? What actually happened if you traveled from the first floor of a house in twenty-first century Mayfair to the Mayfair of, let's say, the fifteenth century, when there weren't any houses here yet, or only very few? Did you arrive in midair and drop to the ground from a height of twenty feet or so? Maybe landing on top of an anthill? Poor Charlotte. But I supposed they could be teaching her to fly in her secret instruction in the mysteries, so maybe she wouldn't end up with ants in her pants.

Speaking of mysteries, I suddenly thought of something to take my mind off it all. I went into Mum's room and looked down at the street. Yes, the man in black was still down there outside number 18. I could see his legs and part of his trench coat. The distance three floors down had

never seemed so great. I tried working out how far it was from here to the ground.

Could you actually survive a fall from so far up? Well, maybe, if you were lucky and landed in the middle of a marsh. Apparently all London had once been marshland, or that's what Mrs. Counter, our geography teacher, said. A marsh was okay—at least you'd have a soft landing. But only to drown horribly in mud.

I swallowed. I didn't like the turn my own thoughts were taking.

I really, really didn't want to be on my own any longer, so I decided to pay a visit to my family down in the music room, even if I risked being sent straight out again because there were top-secret discussions going on.

WHEN I WENT IN, Great-aunt Maddy was sitting in her favorite armchair by the window, and Charlotte was standing near the other window with her hands flat on the Louis Quatorze desk, although we weren't supposed to touch its colorfully lacquered and gilded surface with any part of the body at all. (How anything as hideous as that desk could be as valuable as Lady Arista always said I didn't know. It didn't even have any secret drawers. Lesley and I had checked that out years ago.) Charlotte had gotten changed, and instead of her school uniform, she was wearing a dress that looked like a cross between a nightie, a dressing gown, and a nun's habit.

"I'm still here," she said. "As you can see."

"Well . . . well, that's nice," I said, trying not to stare at her dress with a noticeable expression of horror.

"This is intolerable," said Aunt Glenda, who was pacing up and down between the windows. Like Charlotte, she was tall and slender and had bright red, curly hair. My mum had the same curly hair, and my grandmother's hair had once been red too. Caroline and Nick had inherited the red hair as well, leaving me as the only one with dark, straight hair like my father's.

I used to long for red hair, but Lesley had convinced me that my black hair was a striking contrast to my blue eyes and fair skin. Lesley also managed to persuade me that the little crescent-shaped birthmark on my temple—the one Aunt Glenda always called my "funny little banana"—was intriguingly mysterious and chic. These days I thought I looked quite pretty, especially now that I no longer had braces, which had put my front teeth back where they ought to be and stopped me looking like a rabbit. Although of course I wasn't nearly such a "delightful vision of beguiling charm" as Charlotte, which was how James would have put it. Ha, ha. I wished he could see her in that shapeless sack of a dress.

"Gwyneth, my angel, would you like a sherbet lemon?" Great-aunt Maddy patted the stool next to her chair. "Sit down here and take my mind off all this a bit. Glenda is getting on my nerves, pacing up and down like that."

"You have no idea of a mother's feelings, Maddy," said Aunt Glenda.

"No, I don't suppose I do," sighed Great-aunt Maddy.

Maddy was a plump little person with cheerful, blue, child-like eyes and hair dyed golden blond. There was often a forgotten roller left in it.

“Where’s Lady Arista?” I asked, taking a sherbet lemon.

“Next door on the phone,” said Great-aunt Maddy. “But she’s speaking softly, so I’m afraid you can’t make out a word of it. By the way, those were the last sherbet lemons. You wouldn’t by any chance have time to pop around to Selfridges and get some more, would you?”

“Of course I’ll go,” I said.

Charlotte shifted her weight from one leg to the other, and Aunt Glenda instantly spun around.

“Charlotte?”

“No, it’s nothing,” said Charlotte.

Aunt Glenda’s lips tightened.

“Shouldn’t you be waiting on the ground floor?” I asked Charlotte. “Then you wouldn’t have so far to fall.”

“Shouldn’t you just shut up when you’ve no idea what this is all about?” Charlotte snapped back.

“Really, the last thing Charlotte can do with right now is silly remarks,” said Aunt Glenda.

I was already beginning to regret coming downstairs.

“On the first occasion the gene carrier never travels back farther than a hundred and fifty years,” explained Great-aunt Maddy kindly. “This house was finished in 1781, so Charlotte is perfectly safe here in the music room. At worst she might scare a couple of ladies playing the harpsichord.”

"You bet she would, in that dress," I said, so quietly that only my great-aunt could hear me. She giggled.

The door swung open and Lady Arista came in. As usual, she looked as if she'd swallowed a ramrod. Or several. One for each arm, one for each leg, and one holding it all together in the middle. Her white hair was combed severely back from her face and pinned into a bun at the back of her neck, like a ballet teacher. The strict sort you wouldn't want to tangle with. "There's a driver on his way. The de Villiers family are expecting us at the Temple. Then Charlotte can be read into the chronograph the moment she returns."

I didn't understand a word of this.

"But suppose it doesn't happen today after all?" asked Charlotte.

"Charlotte, darling, you've felt dizzy three times already," said Aunt Glenda.

"It will happen sooner or later," said Lady Arista. "Come along, the driver will be here any minute now."

Aunt Glenda took Charlotte's arm, and together with Lady Arista, they left the room. As the door closed behind them, Great-aunt Maddy and I looked at each other.

"Some people might think a person was invisible, don't you agree?" said Great-aunt Maddy. "At least a good-bye or hello now and then would be nice. Or something really clever, like *Dear Maddy, did you by any chance have one of those visions of yours that might help us?*"

"And did you?"

"No," said Great-aunt Maddy. "Thank God, I didn't.

I'm always ravenously hungry after those visions, and I need to lose weight as it is." She patted her middle.

"Who are these de Villiers people?" I asked.

"A bunch of arrogant show-offs, if you ask me," said Great-aunt Maddy. "All of them lawyers and bankers. They own the de Villiers private bank in the city. That's where we have our accounts."

That didn't sound particularly mystical.

"So what do they have to do with Charlotte?"

"Well, let's say they have problems like ours."

"Meaning what?" Did they have to live under the same roof as a tyrannical grandmother, a frightful aunt, and a cousin who thought herself something special?

"The time-travel gene," said Great-aunt Maddy. "It's passed down through the male line in the de Villiers family."

"You mean they have a Charlotte as well?"

"The male counterpart. His name's Gideon, as far as I know."

"And he's waiting to feel dizzy too?"

"He's already over that part of it. He's two years older than Charlotte."

"So he's been time traveling for the last two years?"

"That's what I assume."

I tried to reconcile this new information with the little I already knew. But since Great-aunt Maddy was being so talkative today I allowed myself only a couple of seconds for that. "And what's a chroni . . . a chrono-thingummy?"

"Chronograph." Great-aunt Maddy rolled her round blue eyes. "It's a kind of apparatus that can be used to send

the gene carriers—only them, no one else!—back to a specific time. It's something to do with blood."

"A *time machine*?" Fueled by blood? Good heavens!

Great-aunt Maddy shrugged. "I've no idea how the thing works. You're forgetting, I know only what I've overheard, same as you, sitting here acting as if butter wouldn't melt in my mouth. It's all a deadly secret."

"Yup. And very complicated," I said. "How do they know Charlotte has the gene, anyway? I mean, why her and not . . . well, let's say *you*?"

"I can't have it, thank goodness," she said. "We Montroses were always a funny lot, but the gene came into our family through your grandmother. Because my brother just had to go and marry her." Aunt Maddy grinned. She was my late grandfather Lucas's sister. Never having been married herself, she'd moved in to keep house for him when they were quite young. "The first time I heard about this gene was after Lucas's wedding. The last gene carrier in Charlotte's hereditary line was a lady called Margaret Tilney, and she in her turn was the grandmother of your grandmother Arista."

"So Charlotte inherited the gene from this Margaret?"

"Well, in between Lucy inherited it. Poor girl."

"Lucy? What Lucy?"

"Your cousin Lucy. Harry's eldest daughter."

"Oh, *that* Lucy," My uncle Harry, the one in Gloucestershire, was a good deal older than Glenda and my mum. His three children had grown up ages ago. David, the youngest, was a twenty-eight-year-old British Airways

pilot. Which unfortunately didn't mean we got a discount on flights. And Janet, the middle one, had children of her own, pains in the neck, both of them, Poppy and Daisy by name. I'd never met Lucy, the eldest. I didn't know much about her either. The Montroses never said a thing about Lucy. She was kind of the black sheep of the family. She'd run away from home at the age of seventeen, and nothing had been heard of her since.

"Lucy's a gene carrier too?"

"Oh, yes," said Great-aunt Maddy. "All hell broke loose here when she disappeared. Your grandmother practically had a heart attack. It was the most shocking scandal." She shook her head so vigorously that her golden curls got all tangled up.

"I can just imagine it." I thought of what would happen if Charlotte simply packed her cases and made for the wide blue yonder.

"No, you can't. You don't know the circumstances in which she disappeared, and it was all to do with that young man—Gwyneth! Take your finger out of your mouth this minute! That's a disgusting habit."

"Sorry." I really hadn't noticed myself beginning to bite my fingernails. "It's just there's so much going on—so much I don't understand."

"Same here," Great-aunt Maddy assured me. "And I've been listening to all this stuff since I was fifteen. What's more, I have what you might call a natural talent for mystery. All the Montroses love secrets. They always have. That's the only reason my poor brother married your

grandmother in the first place, if you ask me. It can't have been her alluring charms, anyway, because she didn't have any." She reached into the box of sherbet lemons, and sighed when her fingers met empty air. "Oh, dear, I'm afraid I must be addicted to these things."

"I'll run to Selfridges and get you some more," I offered.

"You're my darling child, you always will be. Give me a kiss and put your coat on, it's raining. And never bite your nails again, all right?"

My coat was still in my locker at school, so I borrowed Mum's raincoat and pulled the hood over my head as I stepped out of the front door. The man in the entrance of number 18 was just lighting himself a cigarette. On a sudden impulse I waved to him as I ran down the steps.

He didn't wave back, of course.

"Weirdo," I muttered as I hurried off toward Oxford Street. It was raining cats and dogs, and I wished I'd put on my wellies. The flowers on my favorite magnolia tree on the corner were drooping in a melancholy way. Before I reached it, I'd already splashed through three puddles. Just as I was trying to steer my way around a fourth, I was swept suddenly off my soggy feet. My stomach flip-flopped, and before my eyes the street blurred into a gray river.



Ex hoc momento pendet aeternitas.
(Eternity hangs from this moment.)

INSCRIPTION ON A SUNDIAL
IN THE MIDDLE TEMPLE, LONDON

THREE



WHEN I COULD SEE properly again, I noticed a car was coming around the corner—a real old-timer—and I was kneeling on the pavement shaking with fear.

Something was wrong with this street. It didn't look the same as usual. Everything had changed so suddenly.

The rain had stopped, but an icy wind was blowing, and it was much darker than a moment ago, almost night. The magnolia tree had no flowers or leaves. I wasn't even sure whether it was still a magnolia at all.

The spikes of the fence around it were gilded at the tips. I could have sworn they'd been black when I'd seen it not a moment before.

Another vintage car came chugging around the corner. A strange vehicle with tall wheels and shiny spokes. I looked along the pavement—the puddles were nowhere to be seen. Nor were the traffic signs. The paving was bumpy and out of shape, and even the street lamps looked different. Their

flickering yellowish light hardly reached the entrance to the next building.

Deep down inside me, a nasty idea stirred, but I wasn't about to entertain it seriously yet.

I forced myself to breathe deeply. Then I looked around again, more thoroughly this time.

Okay, strictly speaking, there wasn't that much difference. Most of the buildings really looked the same as usual. But still—the teashop where Mum bought the delicious Duchy Originals made by the Prince of Wales had disappeared, and I'd never set eyes on the colossal columned building on the corner.

A man wearing a hat and a dark coat looked at me with a touch of curiosity as he passed, but he didn't try talking to me, or even helping me to stand up. Finally, I did it myself and brushed the dirt off my knees.

The nasty thought that had occurred to me was slowly but surely becoming a ghastly certainty.

Who did I think I was kidding?

I hadn't run into a vintage car rally, and the magnolia hadn't suddenly lost all its leaves. And although I'd have given anything to see Nicole Kidman suddenly come around the corner, this was not, unfortunately, the set of a film from a Henry James novel.

I knew exactly what had happened. I simply knew. And I also knew that there must be some mistake.

I'd landed in another time.

Not Charlotte. Me. Someone or other had gotten the whole thing wrong.

My teeth immediately began chattering. Not just from nerves but with cold as well. There was a bitter chill in the air.

I'd know what to do. Charlotte's words were still echoing in my ears.

Of course Charlotte would have known what to do. But no one had told me.

So I stood there shivering, teeth chattering, at the corner of my own street while people gaped at me. Not that there were many of them out and about. A young woman in an ankle-length coat with a basket over her arm passed me, and behind her came a man in a hat with his collar turned up.

"Excuse me," I said. "Can you by any chance tell me what year this is?"

The woman acted as if she hadn't heard me and walked faster.

The man shook his head. "What impertinence!" he growled.

I sighed. Although the information wouldn't really have helped me much anyway. Basically it didn't make much difference whether this was 1899 or 1923.

At least I knew where I was. I lived less than a hundred yards away. The obvious thing was just to go inside my house.

I had to do something, after all.

The street seemed calm and peaceful in the twilight as I slowly walked back, looking all around me. What was different, what hadn't changed? The buildings looked very

like those of my own time, even on closer examination. I did have the feeling that I'd not seen certain details before, but perhaps it was just that so far I hadn't noticed them. Automatically I glanced at number 18, but the entrance to it was empty—no man in black anywhere in sight.

I stopped.

Our house looked just as it did in my own time. The windows on the ground floor and the first floor were brightly lit, and there was a light on in Mum's room up at the top of the house as well. I felt really homesick as I looked up. Icicles hung from the dormer windows.

I'd know what to do.

So what would Charlotte do? It would soon be dark, and it was already bitterly cold. Where would Charlotte go to keep from freezing? Home?

I stared up at the windows. Maybe my grandfather was still alive in there. Maybe he'd even recognize me? After all, he used to let me ride on his knees when I was little. . . . Oh, don't be so stupid, I thought.

Even if he were alive now, he could hardly recognize me when he hadn't met me yet.

The cold was creeping in under Mum's raincoat. Okay, I'd just ring the bell and ask for shelter for the night.

The only question was how to go about it.

"Hello, my name is Gwyneth, and I'm Lord Lucas Montrose's granddaughter, but he may not have been born yet."

I couldn't expect anyone to believe that. I'd probably find myself in a psychiatric hospital much sooner than I

liked. And psychiatric hospitals were probably dismal places at this period. Once inside, you might never get out again.

On the other hand, I had few alternatives. It wouldn't be long before it was pitch-dark, and I had to spend the night somewhere without freezing to death. Or being spotted by Jack the Ripper. Why couldn't I remember when Jack the Ripper had prowled the streets of London? And where? Surely not the elegant surroundings of Mayfair, I hoped.

If I did manage to speak to one of my ancestors, I might be able to convince him that I knew more about the family and the house than any normal stranger could. Who but me, for instance, could say straight off that the name of Great-great-great-great-great-uncle Hugh's horse was Fat Annie?

A gust of wind made me shiver. It was so cold. I wouldn't have been surprised if snow soon swirled down on top of me.

"Hello, I'm Gwyneth, and I come from the future. I can prove it—take a look at this zipper. I bet those haven't been invented yet, right? Or jumbo jets or TV sets or refrigerators . . ."

Well, it was worth a try. Taking a deep breath, I went up to the front door.

The steps seemed, in an odd way, both familiar and strange. Automatically I felt for the bell-push, but there wasn't one. Obviously electric bells hadn't been invented

yet. Unfortunately, however, that still gave me no hint about the exact date. I didn't even know when they'd found out how to use electricity. Before or after steamships? Had we learnt that in school? If so, I couldn't remember it now.

I found a handle hanging from a chain, like the one that flushed the old-fashioned toilet in Lesley's house. I pulled it, hard, and heard a bell ring behind the door.

Oh, my God.

One of the domestic staff would probably open the door. What could I say to make him or her take me to a member of the family? Maybe Great-great-great-great-great-uncle Hugh was still alive? Or already alive. Alive, anyway. I'd simply ask for him. Or Fat Annie.

Footsteps were coming closer, and I plucked up all my courage, but I never saw who opened the door, because once again the strange feeling swept me off my feet, flung me through time and space, and spat me out on the other side.

I found myself back on the doormat outside our house again, jumped up, and looked around. Everything seemed the same as when I'd left just a little while ago to go and buy Great-aunt Maddy's sherbet lemons. The buildings, the parked cars, even the rain.

The man in black at the entrance of number 18 was staring across the road at me.

"And you're not the only one to be surprised," I muttered.

How long had I been gone? Had the man in black seen me disappear at the corner of the street and then appear

again on our doormat? If so, I bet he couldn't believe his eyes. It served him right.

I rang the bell frantically. Mr. Bernard opened the door.

"In a hurry, are we?" he asked.

"Maybe not you, but I am!"

Mr. Bernard raised his eyebrows.

"'Scuse me, I forgot something important." I made my way past him and ran upstairs two steps at a time.

Great-aunt Maddy looked up in surprise when I raced through the door. "I thought you'd already left, my love."

Out of breath, I stared at the clock on the wall. It was now exactly twenty minutes since I had left the room.

"I'm glad you're here, though. There's something I forgot to tell you. They have the same sherbet lemons at Selfridges but sugar-free, and the packaging looks just the same. But don't buy the sugar-free sherbet lemons, whatever you do, because those give me . . . well, diarrhea."

"Aunt Maddy, why is everyone so sure that Charlotte has the gene?"

"Because . . . oh, ask me something simpler, can't you?" Great-aunt Maddy was looking rather confused.

"Have they tested her blood? Couldn't someone else have the same gene too?" My breathing was slowly calming down.

"Oh, Charlotte is definitely a gene carrier."

"Because it's been found in her DNA?"

"My little angel, you're asking the wrong person. I was always useless at biology—in fact, I don't even know

what DNA is. I was no good at maths either. Anything about numbers and formulas goes straight in one ear and out the other. I can only tell you that Charlotte came into the world on the very day calculated for her hundreds of years ago.”

“So your date of birth decides whether you have this gene or not?” I bit my lower lip. Charlotte had been born on the seventh of October, and I’d been born on the eighth. We were only a single day apart.

“More like the other way around,” said Great-aunt Maddy. “The gene decides the time of the carrier’s birth. They’ve worked it all out.”

“Well, suppose they made a mistake?”

One day’s difference! It was that simple. Someone had mixed the dates up. It wasn’t Charlotte who had this wretched gene, it was me. Or maybe we both had it. Or else . . . I sat down on the stool.

Great-aunt Maddy shook her head. “They didn’t make a mistake, my little angel. If there’s one thing these people are really good at, you can bet it’s arithmetic.”

Who were “these people,” anyway?

“Anyone can make a mistake now and then,” I said.

Great-aunt Maddy laughed. “Not Sir Isaac Newton, I’m afraid.”

“*Newton* worked out the date of Charlotte’s birth?”

“My dear child, I understand your curiosity. When I was your age, I was just the same. But for one thing, it’s sometimes better not to know all the answers, and for another, I really, really would like my sherbet lemons.”

"None of this makes any sense," I said.

"That's only how it looks." Great-aunt Maddy patted my hand. "Even if you're no wiser now than you were before, this conversation must stay private. If your grandmother finds out all I've told you, she'll be furious. And when she's furious, she's even worse than usual."

"I won't say anything, Aunt Maddy. And I'll go and get your sherbet lemons right now."

"You're a good child."

"Just one more question. How long after gene carriers have first traveled in time do they do it again?"

Great-aunt Maddy sighed.

"Please!" I said.

"I don't think there are any rules," said Great-aunt Maddy. "Every gene carrier is probably different. But none of them can fix the times for themselves. If the travel is uncontrolled, it can happen every day, sometimes several times a day. That's why the chronograph is so important. With its help, as I understand, Charlotte won't be flung around helplessly in time. She can be sent to times that aren't very dangerous, where nothing can harm her. So don't worry about your cousin."

To be honest, I was much more worried about myself.

"Then when a gene carrier is in the past, how long has she been gone in the present?" I asked breathlessly. "And the second time a traveler goes back in time, could it be all the way to the dinosaurs, when there was nothing but swamps around here?"

My great-aunt cut me short. "That's enough, Gwyneth. I've no more idea than you have!"

I got to my feet. "Thanks for answering my questions, anyway," I said. "You've been a great help."

"I don't think so. I have a dreadfully guilty conscience. I really shouldn't be satisfying your curiosity, particularly since I'm not supposed to know about any of it myself. In the old days, when I used to ask my brother—that's your dear grandfather—about all these secrets, he always told me the same thing. The less you know, he said, the better for your health. Now, are you going to get me my sherbet lemons? And *not* the sugar-free kind, remember!"

Great-aunt Maddy waved as I left.

How could secrets be bad for anyone's health? And how much had my grandfather known about it all?

"SIR ISAAC NEWTON?" repeated Lesley, baffled. "Wasn't that the force of gravity guy?"

"That's him, all right. But he also calculated the date of Charlotte's birth." I was standing in front of the yogurts in Selfridges Food Hall, holding my mobile to one ear with my right hand and covering the other ear with my left hand. "Only the crazy thing is that no one will believe he made a mistake. Who'd expect Newton to get his sums wrong? But he must have been wrong, Lesley. I was born one day after Charlotte, and *I* traveled back in time. Not her."

"That's more than mysterious. Oh, this stupid thing

is taking forever to start up. Come *on*, will you?" Lesley shouted at her computer.

"Lesley, it was so—so weird! I almost spoke to one of my ancestors! Maybe that fat man on the painting in front of the secret door, Great-great-great-great-great-uncle Hugh, for instance. Well, if it was in his time and not some other period. They could have had me sent off to a loony bin."

"I hate to think what could have happened to you," said Lesley. "I still can't get my mind around this! So much fuss made of Charlotte all these years, and now this happens! Look, you have to tell your mum right away. You'd better go straight back home. It could happen again any moment!"

"Scary, right?"

"Very. Okay, I'm online now. First off I'll Google Newton. And you just go home! Any idea how long Selfridges has been there in Oxford Street? Could have been a deep pit in the old days, and you'd fall twelve yards down!"

"My grandmother will freak right out when she hears about this," I said.

"Yes, and then there's poor Charlotte . . . well, just think, all these years she's had to give up everything, and now she gets nothing in return. Ah, here we are. Newton. Born 1643 in Woolsthorpe—where on earth is that?—died 1727 in London. Blah blah blah. Nothing about time travel here, just stuff about infinitesimal calculus—never heard of it, how about you? Transcendence of all spirals. . . .

Quadratics, optics, sky mechanics, blah blah—ah, here we are, here's the law of gravity. . . . Tell you what, that bit about transcendental spirals sounds kind of closest to time travel, don't you think?"

"To be honest, no," I said.

A couple standing next to me were discussing the yogurt variety they were going to buy at the tops of their voices.

"Are you by any chance still in Selfridges?" shouted Lesley, who had obviously overheard the yogurt orders. "Go home!"

"On my way," I said, waving the yellow paper bag containing Great-aunt Maddy's sherbet lemons in the direction of the exit. "But, Lesley, I *can't* tell them this at home. They'll think I'm crazy."

Lesley spluttered down the phone. "Gwen! Any other family might well send you to the loony bin, but not yours! They're always talking about time-travel genes and chronometers and instruction in mysteries."

"It's a chronograph," I corrected her. "The thing runs on blood! Is that gross or what?"

"Chro—no—graph! Okay, I've Googled it."

I made my way through the crowds in Oxford Street to the next traffic lights. "Aunt Glenda will say I'm just making it all up to look important and steal the show from Charlotte."

"So? When you next travel back in time, at the very latest, she's going to notice that there's been a mistake."

“And suppose I never travel back again? Suppose it was just the once?”

“You don’t believe that yourself, do you? Okay, here we are, a chronograph seems to be a perfectly normal wristwatch. You can get them by the ton on eBay, ten pounds and upward. Oh, damn . . . wait, I’ll Google Isaac Newton plus chronograph plus time travel *plus* blood.”

“Well?”

“Nothing that helps us. At least I don’t think so.” Lesley sighed. “I wish we’d looked all this up earlier. The first thing I’m going to do is find some books about it. Anything I can dig up on time travel. Where did I put that stupid library card? Where are you now?”

“Crossing Oxford Street, then turning down Duke Street.” Suddenly I had to giggle. “Why? Are you planning to come here and draw a chalk circle just in case our connection suddenly breaks? But now I’m wondering what good the silly chalk circle was supposed to do Charlotte.”

“Maybe they’d have sent that other time traveler after her—what was his name again?”

“Gideon de Villiers.”

“Cool name! I’ll Google it. Gideon de Villiers. How do you spell it?”

“How should I know? Back to the chalk circle—where would they have sent this Gideon guy? I mean, what period? Charlotte could have been anywhere. In any minute, any hour, any year, any century. Nope, the chalk circle makes no sense.”

Lesley screeched down my ear so loud that I almost dropped my mobile. "*Gideon de Villiers*. Got him!"

"Really?"

"Yep. It says here, 'The polo team of the Vincent School, Greenwich, has won the All England Schools Polo Championship again this year. Celebrating with the cup, from left to right, headmaster William Henderson, team manager John Carpenter, team captain Gideon de Villiers . . .' and so on and so forth. Wow, so he's the captain too. Only it's such a tiny picture you can't make out where the horses leave off and the team members begin. Where are you now, Gwen?"

"Still in Duke Street. That figures: school in Greenwich, polo, yeah, that must be him. And does it say he sometimes disappears? Maybe straight off his horse?"

"Oh, I've just noticed, this report is three years old. He must have left the school by now. Are you feeling dizzy again?"

"Not so far."

"Where are you now?"

"Oh, Lesley, still in Duke Street. I'm walking as fast as I can."

"Okay, we'll stay on the phone until you get to your front door, and the moment you're home, you have to talk to your mum."

I looked at my watch. "She won't be back from work yet."

"Then wait until she is, but you really must talk to her,

okay? She'll know what to do to keep you out of harm's way. Are you still there? Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, I'm here, and yes, I did. Lesley?"

"Hm?"

"I'm so glad I have you. You're the best friend in the world."

"You're not so bad as a friend yourself," said Lesley. "I mean, you'll soon be able to bring me back cool stuff from the past. What other friend can do that? And next time we have a history test, you can research the whole thing on the spot."

"I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you." Listening to myself, I realized how pathetic I sounded—but what the hell, I was feeling pretty pathetic right now.

"*Can* time travelers bring stuff back from the past?" asked Lesley.

"No idea. Not the faintest. I'll try it next time. I'm in Grosvenor Square now."

"Nearly home, then," said Lesley, relieved. "Apart from the polo business, Google hasn't found anything about any Gideon de Villiers. But there's a whole lot about the de Villiers private bank and the de Villiers legal chambers in the Temple."

"That must be them."

"Any dizzy feelings?"

"No, but thanks for asking all the same."

Lesley cleared her throat. "I know you're scared of it, but all this is kind of cool. I mean, it's a real adventure, Gwen! And you're right in the middle of it."

Oh, yes, I was certainly right in the middle of it.
Just my luck.

LESLEY WAS RIGHT. There was no reason to think that Mum wouldn't believe me. She had always listened to my "ghost stories" as seriously as they deserved. I'd always been able to go to her with anything, so why should this time be any different?

When we were still living in Durham, I'd been followed about for months on end by the ghost of a demon who was supposed to be haunting the cathedral roof in the form of a stone gargoyle. His name was Asrael, and he looked like a cross between a human, a cat, and an eagle. When he realized that I could see him, he'd been so pleased to be able to talk to someone at last that he followed me everywhere, even wanting to sleep in my bed at night. After I got over my first fright—like all gargoyles, he had a rather scary face—we slowly became friends. Sadly, Asrael hadn't been able to move from Durham to London with me, and I still missed him. The few gargoyle demons I'd seen here were not very nice creatures. So far I hadn't met one who was as sweet as Asrael.

If Mum had believed me about Asrael, then she'd probably believe me about the time-travel gene as well. I waited for a good moment to talk to her. But somehow the right moment never seemed to come. As soon as she was home from work, she had to discuss something with Caroline, who had put down her name to look after her class's terrarium in the summer, particularly the class mascot, a

chameleon called Mr. Bean. The summer break was still months away, but it seemed that the discussion couldn't wait.

"You can't look after Mr. Bean, Caroline! You know perfectly well that your grandmother won't have pets in the house," said Mum. "And Aunt Glenda is allergic."

"But Mr. Bean doesn't have any fur," said Caroline. "And he'll be in his terrarium all the time. He won't be in anyone's way."

"He'll be in your grandmother's way."

"Then my grandmother is just silly!"

"Caroline, we can't keep him this summer. No one here knows the first thing about chameleons. Suppose we did something wrong, and Mr. Bean got sick and died?"

"He wouldn't. And I do know how to look after him. Please, Mummy! If I don't bring him home, then Tess will have him again, and she's always saying that she's Mr. Bean's favorite in the class."

"Caroline, I said no!"

Quarter of an hour later, they were still arguing, even when Mum went into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. Caroline stood outside the door and said, "Lady Arista wouldn't need to know. We could smuggle the terrarium into the house while she wasn't here. And she never goes into my room."

"Can't a person get any peace around here, at least when she's in the loo?" Mum called back.

"No," said Caroline. She could be a terrible pain. She didn't stop going on about it until Mum promised that she

personally would plead with Lady Arista to let Mr. Bean spend the summer with us.

I spent the time that Caroline and Mum were wasting on their argument getting chewing gum out of Nick's hair.

We were sitting in the sewing room. He had about half a pound of the stuff sticking to his head and couldn't remember how it got there.

"You must have some idea!" I said. "I'm going to have to cut some of these strands of hair off."

"Doesn't matter," said Nick. "You can cut it all off. Lady Arista said I looked like a girl the other day."

"Lady Arista thinks everyone with hair longer than stubble looks like a girl. It would be a real shame to cut your lovely curls so short."

"They'll grow back. Cut it all off, okay?"

"Not with nail scissors. You'll have to go to the barber's."

"Oh, go on, you can do it," said Nick confidently. Obviously he'd completely forgotten that I'd already cut his hair with a pair of nail scissors once, and he'd looked like a freshly hatched vulture chick. I'd been seven at the time, and he was four. I'd needed his curls to make myself a wig. But it hadn't worked, and I got a scolding and a day's house arrest.

"Don't you dare," said Mum, who had come back into the room. She took the scissors away from me for safety's sake. "If it has to be done, it'll be done by a barber. Tomorrow. We must go down to supper now."

Nick groaned.

“Don’t worry. Lady Arista is out today!” I grinned at him. “No one will scold you for the chewing gum. Or the dirty mark on your sweatshirt.”

“What dirty mark?” Nick looked down at himself. “Oh, darn. That must be pomegranate juice.”

“Like I said, you won’t get in trouble.”

“But it isn’t even Wednesday,” said Nick.

“Well, they’re not here today either.”

“Cool.”

When Lady Arista, Charlotte, and Aunt Glenda were there, dinner was tense and uncomfortable. Lady Arista criticized people’s table manners, mostly Caroline’s and Nick’s (but sometimes Great-aunt Maddy’s as well); Aunt Glenda was always pestering me about my marks at school so she could compare them with Charlotte’s. Then Charlotte would smile like Mona Lisa and say, “None of your business,” if anyone asked her anything.

All things considered, we could have done without these cozy get-togethers, but our grandmother insisted on having all of us there.

The only way you could get out of family dinner was if you had a note from the doctor or a noticeably infectious disease like the plague. Mrs. Brompton, who was the housekeeper during the week, cooked all our meals. (Unfortunately, at weekends either Aunt Glenda or Mum did the cooking, which was usually so gross, Nick and I could barely force it down—and we never got to order out.)

But on Wednesday evenings, when Lady Arista, Aunt Glenda, and Charlotte were away, busy with their mysteries,

supper was much more relaxed. And we all thought it was great that today felt like a Wednesday evening, although it was only Monday. Not that we slurped our food, smacked our lips, and belched, but we did venture to interrupt each other, put our elbows on the table, and discuss subjects that Lady Arista would have thought unsuitable.

Chameleons, for instance.

“Do you like chameleons, Aunt Maddy? Wouldn’t you like to have one someday? A really tame one?”

“Well, er, now that you mention it, I realize I’ve always wanted a chameleon,” said Great-aunt Maddy, heaping rosemary-seasoned potatoes on her plate. “Yes, definitely.”

Caroline beamed. “Maybe your wish will come true someday soon.”

“Did Lady Arista and Glenda leave any message?” asked Mum.

“Your mother called this afternoon to say they wouldn’t be home for supper,” said Great-aunt Maddy. “I said how sorry we’d all be not to see them. I hope that was all right.”

“You bet.” Nick giggled.

“And Charlotte? Has she . . . ?” asked Mum.

“I don’t think so. Not yet.” Great-aunt Maddy shrugged. “But they’re expecting it any moment now. The poor girl keeps feeling dizzy, and now she has a migraine as well.”

“Oh, dear, I do feel sorry for her,” said Mum. She put her fork down and stared absentmindedly at the dark paneling of the dining room, which looked as if someone had

confused the walls with the floor and covered them with wooden parquet.

"Suppose Charlotte doesn't travel back in time *at all*?" I asked.

"It will happen sooner or later," said Nick, imitating our grandmother's confident tones.

Everyone laughed except for Mum and me.

"But suppose it doesn't? Suppose they've made a mistake, and Charlotte doesn't have this gene after all?" I persisted.

This time Nick imitated Aunt Glenda's voice. "Even when she was a baby, anyone could see that Charlotte was born to higher things. She can't be compared with ordinary people."

Once again everyone laughed. Except for Mum. "What makes you think that, Gwyneth?"

"I was only . . ." I hesitated.

"I told you why there can't possibly be any mistake, dear," said Great-aunt Maddy.

"Yes, because Sir Isaac Newton was a genius, and a genius can't get his sums wrong," I said. "I know. But why did Newton work out Charlotte's date of birth in the first place?"

"Aunt Maddy!" Mum looked reproachfully at Great-aunt Maddy.

Great-aunt Maddy tut-tutted. "Oh, dear, she went on and on at me, asking questions. What was I to do? She's just like you when you were little, Grace. And apart from that, she promised to keep quiet as a mouse about it."

"Only to Grandmother," I said. "Did Isaac Newton invent that chronograph thing as well?"

"You little telltale," said Great-aunt Maddy. "I'm not saying any more."

"What chronograph thing?" asked Nick.

"It's a time machine for sending Charlotte back into the past," I explained. "And it uses Charlotte's blood for fuel."

"Gross!" said Nick, and Caroline screeched, "Yuck, blood!"

"Can you travel into the future with the chronograph as well?" asked Nick.

Mum groaned. "Now look what you've done, Aunt Maddy."

"They're your children, Grace," said Great-aunt Maddy, smiling. "It's only natural for them to want to know what's going on."

"Yes." Mum looked at us one by one. "But you must never ask your grandmother such questions. Do you understand?"

"Although she's probably the only one who knows the answers," I said.

"But she wouldn't give them to you."

"And how much do you know about it all, Mum?"

"More than I like." Mum was smiling as she said that, but I thought it was a sad smile. "And no, you *can't* travel into the future, Nick, for the simple reason that the future hasn't happened yet."

"Huh?" said Nick. "What sort of sense does that make?"

There was a knock, and Mr. Bernard came in with the telephone. Lesley would probably have freaked out if she'd seen the phone lying on a silver platter. Sometimes Mr. Bernard overdid the butler thing a bit.

"A telephone call for Miss Grace," he said.

Mum picked up the phone, and Mr. Bernard turned around to leave the dining room. He didn't eat dinner with us unless Lady Arista invited him to, which was about twice a year. Nick and I suspected that he ordered out for Italian or Chinese meals and enjoyed them in the comfort of his own room.

"Yes? Oh, Mother, it's you."

Great-aunt Maddy's eyes twinkled. "Your grandmother can read thoughts!" she whispered. "She guesses we're discussing forbidden subjects here. Who's going to clear these plates away? We must make room for Mrs. Brompton's apple cake."

"And the vanilla custard!" I'd eaten a huge mound of rosemary potatoes with glazed carrots and pork medallions, but I wasn't full yet. All the excitement had made me extra hungry. I stood up and began clearing the dirty dishes into the dumbwaiter.

"If Charlotte goes back in time far enough, could she bring me back a baby dinosaur?" asked Caroline.

Great-aunt Maddy shook her head. "Animals and humans without the gene can't move through time. And no one can travel that far back anyway."

"Oh," said Caroline, looking rather disappointed.

"Just as well, if you ask me," I said. "Imagine what it

would be like if time travelers were always bringing back dinosaurs and saber-toothed tigers—or Attila the Hun or Adolf Hitler.”

Mum had finished talking on the phone. “They’re staying the night there,” she said. “To be on the safe side.”

“Staying the night where?” asked Nick.

Mum didn’t answer. “Aunt Maddy?” she said. “Are you all right?”



Twelve pillars the castle of time will bear.

Twelve creatures rule land and sea.

The eagle is ready to soar in the air,

Five's the foundation and also the key.

In the Circle of Twelve, Number Twelve becomes Two.

The hawk hatches seventh, yet Three is the clue.

FROM THE SECRET WRITINGS OF COUNT SAINT-GERMAIN

FOUR



GREAT-AUNT MADDY looked curiously rigid. She sat staring into space, her hands clutching the arms of the chair. All the color had drained from her face.

"Aunt Maddy? Oh, Mum, has she had a stroke? Aunt Maddy, can you hear me? Aunt Maddy!" I tried to take her hand, but Mum stopped me.

"Don't do that! Don't touch her."

Caroline started crying.

"What's the matter with her?" asked Nick. "Is something stuck in her throat?"

"We'll have to call the doctor," I said. "Mum, do something!"

"She hasn't had a stroke, and there isn't anything in her throat. She's seeing a vision," said Mum. "It will be over soon."

"Are you sure?" Great-aunt Maddy's rigid glance

frightened me. Her pupils were hugely dilated, and she wasn't blinking at all.

"It's so cold in here all of a sudden," whispered Nick. "Don't you feel it too?"

Caroline was whimpering quietly to herself. "Make it stop."

"Lucy!" someone cried. We jumped in alarm and then realized that it was Great-aunt Maddy's voice. The temperature really had dropped. I looked around, but there were no ghosts in the room. "Lucy, oh, the dear child! She's leading me to a tree. A tree covered with red berries. Oh, where's she gone? I can't see her anymore. There's something lying between the roots of the tree. A huge jewel, a sapphire cut in the shape of an egg. A sapphire egg. It's so beautiful! And valuable. But now it's cracking—oh, it will break—but there's something inside it . . . a little chick hatching. A raven chick. Hopping over to the tree." Great-aunt Maddy laughed, but her eyes were still fixed. Her shaky hands grappled for the arms of the chair.

"The wind's rising." Great-aunt Maddy's laughter died away. "A stormy wind. Everything's going around and around. I'm flying. Flying to the stars with the raven. A tower. A huge clock high up on the tower. There's someone sitting up there on the clock dangling her legs. Come down at once, you silly girl!" Suddenly there was fear in her voice. She began to scream. "The wind will blow her down. She's gone much too high. What's she doing there? A shadow! A big bird circling in the sky! There! It's swooping down on her. Gwyneth! Gwyneth!"

I couldn't stand this any longer. I pushed Mum aside, took Great-aunt Maddy's shoulder, and shook her gently. "I'm here, Aunt Maddy! Please! Look at me!"

Great-aunt Maddy turned her head. She did look at me. Gradually some color came back into her face. "My little angel!" she said. "How silly of you to climb so high!"

"Are you okay?" I looked at Mum. "Are you sure it wasn't anything wrong with her?"

"It was a vision," said Mum. "She's all right."

"No, I'm not. It was a horrible vision," said Great-aunt Maddy. "Although the beginning was nice."

Caroline had stopped crying. She and Nick were staring at Great-aunt Maddy, looking upset.

"That was eerie," said Nick. "Did you notice how cold it got?"

"You were imagining things," I said.

"No, I wasn't!"

"It *was* eerie," said Caroline. "I had goose bumps."

Great-aunt Maddy reached for Mum's hand. "I met your niece Lucy, Grace. She still looked the same as ever. That sweet smile . . ."

Mum looked as if she was going to burst into tears.

"And I just didn't understand the rest of it," Great-aunt Maddy went on. "A sapphire egg, a raven, Gwyneth on the clock tower, and then that horrible bird. Can you make anything of all that?"

Mum sighed. "Of course not, Aunt Maddy. *You're* the one who has these visions." She sat down on one of the dining chairs beside Great-aunt Maddy.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I understand them," said Great-aunt Maddy. "Did you write it all down so that we can tell your mother about it later?"

"No, Auntie, I didn't."

Maddy leaned forward. "Then we'd better write it down at once. Right, first there was Lucy, then the tree. Red berries . . . could it have been a mountain ash? The sapphire egg was lying there. . . . Oh, my word, I'm so hungry! I hope you didn't finish the apple cake. I deserve at least two slices today. Or three."

"THAT REALLY *was* very, very eerie," I said. Caroline and Nick had gone to sleep, and I was sitting with Mum on the edge of her bed, trying to find a good way to tell her about my problem. *Mum, something funny happened to me this afternoon, and I'm scared it could happen again.*

Mum was deeply engaged in her evening beauty routine. She'd finished her face already. Obviously good skin care paid off. You really wouldn't have thought my mum was over forty.

"That's the first time I've seen Great-aunt Maddy have one of her visions," I said.

"It was the first time she's ever had one during dinner," replied Mum, rubbing cream on her hands and massaging it in. She always said that age showed first on your hands and your neck.

"Do—do we take her visions seriously?"

Mum shrugged. "Hm, well. You heard all that confused stuff she was saying. And it can always be interpreted

differently. She had a vision three days before your grandfather died. She saw a black panther jumping on his chest."

"And Grandfather died of a heart attack. So that makes sense."

"See what I mean? They always hold some truth. Want some hand cream, darling?"

"Do you believe in it? I mean, not the hand cream, Aunt Maddy's vision?"

"I think Aunt Maddy really sees what she says she does. But that doesn't mean her visions predict the future, not by a long shot. Or that it has to mean anything in particular."

"I don't understand!" I held out my hands, and Mum began putting cream on them.

"It's a bit like your ghosts, darling. I'm sure you do see them, just as I believe that Aunt Maddy has visions."

"Does that mean you believe I see ghosts but you don't believe they really exist?" I cried indignantly, taking my hands away.

"I don't *know* whether they really exist or not," said Mum. "What I believe has nothing to do with it."

"But if they didn't exist, that would mean I was just imagining them. And *that* would mean I was crazy."

"No," said my mum. "It would only mean that . . . oh, darling, I don't know what to say. Sometimes I get the feeling we have rather too much imagination in this family. I suppose we'd live more restful, happier lives if we stuck to believing what *normal* people believe."

"I get the message," I said. Maybe it wouldn't be such a great idea to come out with my news tonight. *Hey, Mum, we traveled back into the past this afternoon, me and my abnormal imagination.*

"Don't look so sad," said Mum. "I know, I know, there are more things in heaven and earth and all that. But maybe we make them seem far too important the more we think about them. I don't think you're crazy. Or Aunt Maddy either. But be honest: do you imagine Aunt Maddy's vision could have something to do with your own future?"

"Maybe."

"You do? Are you planning to climb a clock tower sometime soon—sit on the clock and dangle your legs?"

"Of course not. But maybe it was a symbol."

"Maybe," said Mum. "Or maybe not. Go to sleep now, darling. You've had a long day." She looked at the little clock on her bedside table. "Let's hope it's safely behind Charlotte by now. Oh, I do hope she's finally done it."

"But maybe Charlotte just has too much imagination as well," I said. I stood up and gave Mum a kiss.

I'd try again tomorrow.

Maybe.

"Good night."

"Good night, sweetie. I love you."

"Love you too, Mum."

When I'd closed my bedroom door behind me and climbed into bed, I felt guilty. I should have told my mother

all about it. But what she said had made me think. Yeah, sure, I did have a big imagination, but daydreaming is one thing. Imagining you're traveling through time is quite another.

People who imagined that kind of thing got psychiatric treatment. And they should, if you asked me. Maybe I was like those weirdos who claim to have been abducted by aliens. Completely out of my mind.

I switched off my bedside lamp and snuggled down under the duvet. Which was worse? Being crazy or actually traveling back in time?

Probably the second, I thought. Maybe you could take tablets for the first.

In the dark my fears came back. Once again I was wondering how far I would fall from here to the ground floor. So I switched the bedside light on again and turned my face to the wall. Hoping to get to sleep, I tried thinking of something harmless and soothing, but I just couldn't do it. In the end I counted backward from a thousand.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, because I'd been dreaming of a big bird when I woke and sat up in bed, heart pounding.

There it was again, that horrible dizzy sensation in my stomach. I jumped out of bed in a panic and ran to Mum's room as fast as my trembling legs would carry me. I didn't care if she thought I was crazy—I just wanted it to stop. And I did *not* want to fall three floors down and land in a swamp!

I got no farther than the passage before I was swept off my feet. Convinced that my last hour had come, I squeezed my eyes shut. But I only fell on my knees with a bump, and the floor felt just like the familiar wooden floorboards. Cautiously, I opened my eyes. It was lighter now, as if the sun had risen in the last second. For a moment I hoped that nothing had happened. Then I saw that I had indeed landed in our corridor, but it looked different. The walls were painted dark olive green, and there were no ceiling lights.

I heard voices coming from Nick's room. Female voices.

I stood up quickly. If anyone saw me now . . . how was I going to explain where I'd suddenly come from? In my Hello Kitty pajamas.

"I'm so tired of getting up at the crack of dawn," one voice was saying. "Walter can sleep until nine in the morning. Not us! I should've stayed on the farm milking cows."

"Walter's on duty half the night, Clarrie. Your cap's crooked," said the second voice. "Tuck your hair neatly under it, or Mrs. Mason will be cross."

"She's always cross anyway," grumbled the first voice.

"There are much stricter housekeepers, Clarrie dear. Come on, or we'll be late. Mary went downstairs fifteen minutes ago."

"Yes, *and* she made her bed first. Always busy, always neat, just the way Mrs. Mason likes her housemaids. Mary does it on purpose. Have you felt her blanket? It's ever so soft. That's not fair!"

I had to get out of here, fast. But where could I go? Good thing I knew my way around the house.

"I've been given a horrid scratchy blanket," Clarrie's voice complained.

"You'll be glad of it in winter. Come along."

The door handle was pressed down. I raced over to the built-in cupboard, flung the door open, and shut it again after me, just as the door of Nick's room opened.

"I don't see why I have to have a scratchy blanket and Mary gets a nice soft one," Clarrie's voice went on. "It's so unfair. Betty can go out into the country with Lady Montrose, and we have to spend all summer in the stuffy city air."

"You really should try not to complain so much, Clarrie."

I agreed with the other woman. This girl Clarrie was a real Moaning Minnie.

I heard the two of them go downstairs and breathed a sigh of relief. That was a close one! But now what? Should I just wait in the cupboard until I traveled back again? That was probably the safest thing to do. Sighing, I crossed my arms.

Behind me in the darkness, someone grunted.

I froze with horror. What, for heaven's sake, was that?

"Is that you, Clarrie?" asked a voice from the shelf where the clean sheets were stacked. It was a male voice. "Did I oversleep?"

Heavens above! Someone actually *slept* in this cupboard! What a way to treat a person!

“Clarrie? Mary? Who’s that?” asked the voice. Its owner sounded more awake now. There were noises in the cupboard. A hand reached out and touched my back. I wasn’t hanging about, waiting for it to grab hold of me—I opened the cupboard door and ran for it.

“Stop! Stay where you are!”

I looked back over my shoulder. A young man in a long white shirt emerged from the cupboard to catch me.

I ran downstairs. Where on earth was I going to hide now? The footsteps of the man from the cupboard came closer, and he was shouting, “Stop, thief!”

Thief? I couldn’t believe my ears. What was I supposed to have stolen? His nightcap or something?

Luckily I could have run down these stairs even in my sleep. I was already familiar with every single step. I raced down two flights of stairs at the speed of light, and then past Great-great-great-great-great-uncle Hugh’s portrait—leaving it behind on my left with some regret, because the secret door behind it would have been a great way to get out of this stupid situation. But the doorknob always jammed slightly, and in the time I’d have needed to get the door open, the man in the nightshirt would have caught up with me. No, I needed a better place to hide.

On the first floor I almost collided with a housemaid carrying a big jug. She squealed as I raced past, then dropped the jug, just like in a scene from a film. Water splashed to the floor, along with broken china.

I hoped my pursuer would slip and fall on it—like in a

farce. He wouldn't get past the water and broken china too quickly, anyway. I made use of my start on him to run down the steps to the musicians' gallery, open the door to the little storage space under it, and crouch inside. It was dusty and untidy in here, the same as in my own time, and full of cobwebs. A little light fell in through the gaps between the steps, enough for me to see that at least there wasn't anyone sleeping in *this* cupboard. It was crammed with old junk, just like in the twenty-first century.

Above me, I heard loud voices. The man in the night-shirt was talking to the poor housemaid who had dropped the jug.

"The girl must be a thief! I never saw her here in the house before."

Other voices joined in.

"She ran on down. Maybe there's a whole pack of them here."

"Please, Mrs. Mason, I couldn't help it. The thief just ran into me. I expect they're after her ladyship's jewels."

"I didn't meet anyone on the stairs, so she must still be here somewhere. Make sure the front door is locked and search the house," ordered an energetic female voice. "As for you, Walter, go upstairs at once and put something on to cover your hairy legs. Not a nice sight first thing in the morning."

I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. I'd hidden in here about a million times when I was little, but I'd never been so scared of being found. Cautiously, so as not

to make any noise that might give me away, I squeezed farther in among the junk. A spider ran over my arm, such a big one that I almost screeched with fright.

“Lester, Mr. Jenkins, and Tott, you search the ground floor and the cellars. Mary and I will search the first floor. Clarrie, guard the back door, and, Helen, you watch the front door.”

“Suppose she tries getting out through the kitchen?”

“She’d have to get past Mrs. Craine and her iron pans first. Look in the cupboards under the stairs and behind all the curtains.”

I was finished.

Oh, dammit. This was all just so—so surreal!

Here I was sitting in my pajamas in a cupboard, surrounded by fat spiders, dusty furniture, and—oh, my God, was that by any chance a stuffed crocodile?—and waiting to be arrested for theft. And all because Sir Isaac Newton had gotten his stupid sums wrong.

I felt so angry and helpless that I started crying. Maybe these people would feel sorry for me when they found me. The crocodile’s glass eyes sparkled mockingly in the dim light. There were footsteps to be heard all over the house now. Dust from the steps was falling into my eyes.

But then I felt that tugging sensation in my stomach again. I’d never been so glad of it. The crocodile blurred before my eyes, everything spun wildly, and all was quiet again. And pitch-dark.

I heaved a huge sigh. Don’t panic, I thought. Presumably I’d traveled home again. And I was probably now

stuck among the junk under these steps in our own time. When the place also had fat spiders in it.

Something soft touched my face. In a panic, I flailed my arms and hauled my legs out from under a chest of drawers. There was a rumbling sound, boards creaked, an old lamp fell over. That's to say, I thought it was a lamp, but I couldn't see a thing. I could wriggle out, however. Relieved, I made my way to the cupboard door and crawled out of hiding. It was still dark outside the cupboard as well, but I could just about see the outline of the banisters, the tall windows, the sparkling chandeliers.

And a figure coming toward me. The beam of a flashlight dazzled me.

I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound would come out.

"Were you looking for anything in particular in that cubbyhole, Miss Gwyneth?" asked the figure. It was Mr. Bernard. "I'll be happy to help you find it."

"I, er . . . I . . ." I still felt breathless. It was the fright I'd had affecting my lungs. "What are *you* doing down here, Mr. Bernard?"

"I heard a noise," said Mr. Bernard, with great dignity. "You seem to be a little—well, dusty."

"Yes." Dusty, scratched, and tearstained. I stealthily wiped my cheeks.

Mr. Bernard's owl eyes were examining me in the beam of the flashlight. I looked defiantly back at him. It wasn't forbidden to get into a cupboard in the middle of

the night, was it? And why I should was no business of Mr. Bernard's.

Did he actually sleep in his glasses?

"It's another two hours before the alarm clocks go off," he said at last. "I suggest you spend the time in your bed. I'm going to get a little more rest myself. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Bernard," I said.



Despite a thorough search of the house, it proved impossible to lay hands on the girl thief seen early this morning in the town house of Lord Horatio Montrose (Inner Circle) in Bourdon Place. She probably escaped by climbing out of a window into the garden. The housekeeper, Mrs. Mason, drew up a list of items found to be missing: silver cutlery and valuable jewelry, the property of Lady Montrose, including a necklace given to Lord Montrose's mother by the Duke of Wellington. Lady Montrose is at present in the country.

FROM *THE ANNALS OF THE GUARDIANS*

12 JULY 1851

REPORT: DAVID LOYDE, ADEPT 2ND DEGREE

f I V E



“YOU LOOK WORN OUT,” said Lesley in the school yard at break.

“I feel terrible.”

Lesley patted my arm. “All the same, those dark rings under your eyes kind of suit you,” she said, trying to cheer me up. “They make your eyes look extra blue.”

I smiled. Lesley was so sweet. We were sitting on the bench under the chestnut tree, and we could only talk in whispers, because Cynthia Dale was sitting behind us with a girlfriend, and right beside them Gordon Gelderman was talking about football with two other boys from our class, in a voice somewhere between a duck’s quack and a bear’s growl. I didn’t want them to overhear us. They all thought I was weird enough anyway.

“Oh, Gwen, you really ought to have told your mother.”

“You’ve said that at least fifty times now.”

"Yes, because it's true. I can't understand why you didn't."

"Because I . . . no, to be honest, I don't understand why myself. Somehow or other, I suppose I was hoping it wouldn't happen again."

"But that adventure in the night—I mean, just think what could have happened to you! Take your great-aunt's vision—it has to mean you're in danger. The clock stands for time travel, the tall tower for danger, and the bird . . . oh, you shouldn't have woken her up! It'd probably have gotten really exciting at that point. I'm going to Google the whole thing this afternoon—raven, sapphire, tower, mountain ash tree. I've found a Web site about extrasensory phenomena—it tells you lots of stuff. And I've looked up loads of books about time travel for us. And films. *Back to the Future*, parts one to three. Maybe we can find out something from those. . . ."

I thought about what fun it had always been, sitting on the sofa in Lesley's house watching DVDs. Sometimes we used to mute the sound and synchronize our own words with the pictures.

"Are you feeling dizzy?"

I shook my head. Now I knew what it had been like for poor Charlotte these last few weeks. Being asked all the time whether I was dizzy really got on my nerves. Particularly when I was always sort of listening to myself and waiting for the dizzy feeling.

"If we only knew when it will happen again," said

Lesley. "I do think it's unfair. Charlotte has been prepared for this for ages, but you've been thrown in at the deep end."

"I've no idea what Charlotte would have done last night if she'd been chased by the man who was sleeping in our built-in cupboard," I said. "I don't think the dancing and fencing lessons would have been much use there. No horse in sight for her to ride away on, either."

I giggled, imagining Charlotte in my place, running all over the house to get away from the angry young man called Walter who slept in the cupboard. Perhaps she'd have snatched a sword off the wall in the salon and slaughtered all the poor servants.

"No, silly, of course those things wouldn't have done her any good. But they wouldn't have happened to her, because that chrono-thingy would have sent her somewhere else. Somewhere nice and peaceful. A place where nothing could harm her! But you risk your life instead of telling your family they've been teaching the wrong person."

"Maybe by now Charlotte has traveled in time as well. Then they'll have what they wanted anyway."

Lesley sighed and began going through the stack of paper on her lap. She had prepared a file of useful information for me. Well, more or less useful. For instance, she had printed out photos of vintage cars. According to them, the car I'd seen on my first journey through time dated from 1906.

"Jack the Ripper was haunting the East End in 1888. The stupid thing is, no one's ever found out who he was.

All sorts of people have been suspected, but there's never been any proof. So if you ever lose your way in the East End in 1888, any man you meet is potentially dangerous. The Great Fire of London was in 1666, and there was plague in the city practically all the time, but 1348, 1528, and 1665 were particularly bad years. Then there's the Blitz in the Second World War. The air raids began in 1940 and left almost all of London in ruins. You'd better find out if your house escaped being hit. If so, you'll be safe there. Otherwise St. Paul's Cathedral would be a good place, because it did get hit once, but almost miraculously, it stayed standing. So, you could hide there."

"It all sounds dreadfully dangerous," I said.

"Yes, I always thought of time travel as more romantic. I mean, I kind of imagined Charlotte in her own historical films. Dancing with Mr. Darcy at a ball, falling in love with some sexy Highlander. Telling Anne Boleyn it would be a really, really bad idea to marry Henry VIII. That kind of thing."

"Anne Boleyn's the one they beheaded?"

Lesley nodded. "There's a great film with Natalie Portman. I could borrow us the DVD. . . . Gwen, please promise me you'll talk to your mum today."

"I promise. I'll do it tonight."

"Where's Charlotte?" Cynthia craned her neck to look around the tree trunk. "I wanted to copy her Shakespeare essay. Er—I mean I wanted to get a few ideas from it."

"Charlotte's not well," I said.

"What's the matter with her?"

"Diarrhea," said Lesley. "Very bad. Spends all her time sitting on the loo."

"Ew, spare us the details!" said Cynthia. "Can I look at your essays, then, you two?"

"We haven't finished them yet," said Lesley. "We're going to watch *Shakespeare in Love* again first."

"You can read my essay," Gordon Gelderman said in his deepest bass voice. His head appeared on the other side of the tree trunk. "All out of Wikipedia."

"I might just as well look up Wikipedia for myself," said Cynthia.

The bell rang, and break was over.

"Double English," groaned Gordon. "For a man, that's torture. But I can see Cynthia slobbering already when she thinks of Prince Charming."

"Shut up, Gordon."

Everyone knew that Gordon never shut up. "I can't imagine why you all think Mr. Whitman is so great. I mean, he's such a poof!"

"He is not!" Cynthia said indignantly, standing up.

"He's definitely gay!" Gordon followed her to the entrance. He'd be needling Cynthia all the way up to the second floor.

Lesley rolled her eyes. "Come on," she said, and gave me her hand to pull me up from the bench. "Off we go for our date with Prince Charming Squirrel!"

We caught up with Cynthia and Gordon on the stairs up to the second floor. They were still talking about Mr. Whitman.

"You can tell from that weird signet ring he wears," said Gordon. "Only gay guys wear that sort of thing."

"My grandfather always wore a signet ring," I said, although I didn't really want to get mixed up in this.

"Then your grandfather was gay too," said Gordon.

"You're just jealous," said Cynthia.

"Jealous? Me?"

"Of course you are. Because Mr. Whitman is the best-looking, most masculine, cleverest, straightest guy ever. Next to him you look like a silly, weedy little boy."

"Thanks very much for the compliment," said Mr. Whitman. He'd appeared behind us, unnoticed, with a stack of paper under his arm and, as always, breathtakingly good-looking. (Even if he did also look a bit like a squirrel.)

Cynthia went even redder than bright scarlet in the face, if that's possible. I actually felt sorry for her.

Gordon grinned nastily.

"As for you, Gordon, maybe you ought to do a little research into signet rings and their wearers," said Mr. Whitman. "I'd like you to write a short essay on the subject by next week."

Now Gordon went red. But unlike Cynthia, he could still speak. "For English or history?" he squeaked.

"I'd welcome it if you would concentrate on the historical aspects, but I leave you an entirely free hand there. Shall we say five pages by Monday?" Mr. Whitman opened our classroom door and smiled brightly at us. "In you go."

"I hate him," muttered Gordon, sitting down.

Lesley patted him consolingly on the shoulder. "I think it's mutual."

"Please tell me that was just a bad dream," said Cynthia.

"It was only a dream," I said obligingly. "Mr. Whitman didn't really hear a word about you thinking he's the sexiest man alive."

Groaning, Cynthia sank into her chair. "Earth, kindly open and swallow me up!"

I sat down at my place next to Lesley. "Poor thing—she's still as red as a tomato."

"And I think she'll be a tomato to the end of her school days. Was that ever embarrassing!"

"Maybe Mr. Whitman will give her better marks now."

Mr. Whitman glanced at Charlotte's place and looked thoughtful.

"Mr. Whitman? Charlotte's not well," I said. "I'm not sure if my aunt called the school secretary's office—"

"She has diarrhea!" bleated Cynthia. Obviously she felt an urgent need not to be the only one with something to be embarrassed about.

"Charlotte is excused," said Mr. Whitman. "She'll probably be absent for a few days. Until everything has . . . returned to normal." He turned around and wrote THE SONNET on the board in chalk. "Can someone tell me how many sonnets Shakespeare wrote?"

"What did he mean by *returned to normal*?" I whispered to Lesley.

"I didn't get the impression he was talking about Charlotte's diarrhea," Lesley whispered back.

Neither did I.

"Have you ever taken a close look at his signet ring?"
Lesley whispered.

"No, have you?"

"There's a star on it. A star with twelve points."

"So?"

"Twelve points—like on a clock."

"A clock doesn't have points."

Lesley rolled her eyes. "Doesn't that ring a bell with you? Twelve! Clock! Time! *Time travel!* I bet you . . . Gwen?"

"Oh, no!" I said. My insides were going on a roller-coaster ride again.

Lesley stared at me, horrified. "Oh, no!"

I was just as horrified. The last thing I wanted was to dissolve into thin air in front of the entire class. So I got up and staggered to the door, my hand pressed to my stomach.

"I think I'm going to throw up," I told Mr. Whitman. I didn't wait for his answer. I flung the door open and tottered out into the corridor.

"Maybe someone ought to go with her," I heard Mr. Whitman say. "Lesley, please would you . . .?"

Lesley came racing after me, firmly closing the classroom door. "Okay, quick! Into the girls' toilets. No one will see us there. Gwen? Gwenny?"

Lesley's face blurred before my eyes. Her voice seemed to come from very far away. And then she'd disappeared entirely. I was standing on my own in a corridor papered with magnificent gold-patterned wallpaper. Instead of the school's ugly linoleum floor tiles, beautiful

wooden floorboards stretched ahead of me, polished to a high sheen, with elaborate patterns in the wood. It was obviously night, or at least evening, but candleholders with lighted candles were fixed to brackets on the walls, and chandeliers hung from the painted ceiling, also with candles burning in them. Everything was bathed in soft, golden light.

My first thought was *Great, I didn't fall over this time.* My second thought was *Where can I hide around here before anyone sees me?*

Because I wasn't alone in this house. I heard music from below. Violin music. And voices.

A lot of voices.

The familiar school corridor was almost unrecognizable now. I tried to remember the way the space here was divided up. Behind me had to be my classroom door, and in the room opposite, Mrs. Counter was now teaching geography to Year Six. Next to the Year Six classroom was a stockroom for equipment. If I hid in there, at least no one would see me materializing when I came back.

On the other hand, the stockroom was usually locked, so it might not be a great idea to hide there after all. If I traveled forward again through time and landed in a locked room, then supposing I found a way to get out, I'd also have to think up some plausible explanation of how on earth I got there in the first place.

But if I hid in one of the other rooms, when I traveled to my own time again, I'd be materializing out of nowhere in front of an entire classroom, including a teacher. Explaining that would probably be a lot harder.

I thought maybe I should just stay in this corridor and hope it wouldn't last long. After all, I'd been gone for only a few minutes both times I'd traveled into the past.

I leaned against the brocade wallpaper and waited hopefully for the dizzy sensation. Confused voices and laughter drifted up from down below. I heard glasses clinking and then the violins playing again. It sounded as if a lot of people were having a good time down there. Maybe James was at the party. After all, he used to live here. I imagined him very much alive, dancing somewhere downstairs.

A pity I couldn't meet him. But he probably wouldn't have been pleased if I told him how we knew each other. I mean how we *would* know each other some day, long after he died . . . er, long after he would be dead.

If I only knew what he'd died from, maybe I could warn him. *Listen, James, on the fifteenth of July a tile will fall on your head in Park Lane, so you'd better stay at home that day.* The stupid thing was that James didn't know what he'd died of. He didn't even know he was dead. Er, was going to die. Would be dead.

The longer you thought about this time travel stuff, the more complicated it got.

I heard footsteps on the stairs. Someone was running up them. No, two someones. Dammit, couldn't you even stand around here for a couple of minutes in peace and quiet? Now where? I decided on the room opposite, the one that in my own time was the Year Six classroom. The door handle stuck. It took me a couple of seconds to realize I must push it up and not down.

When I finally managed to slip into the room, the footsteps were quite close. There were candles burning in brackets on the walls here, too. How careless to leave them alight with no one in the room! At home I'd be dead if I forgot to blow out a tea light in the sewing room in the evening.

I looked around for somewhere to hide, but there wasn't much furniture in this room. Some kind of sofa with curvy gilded legs, a desk, upholstered chairs, nothing you could hide behind if you were any larger than a mouse. So all I could do was get behind one of the floor-length golden yellow curtains—not a very original hiding place. But so far no one was looking for me.

I could hear voices out in the corridor now.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked a man's voice. It sounded rather angry.

"Anywhere! Away from you, that's all," replied another voice. It was the voice of a girl, a girl in floods of tears, to be precise. To my alarm, she came right into the room. And the man came after her. Through the curtain I could see their shadows moving.

Of course, what did I expect? Of all the rooms up here, they had to choose the one where I was hiding.

"Leave me alone," said the girl's voice.

"I *can't* leave you alone," said the man. "Whenever I leave you alone, you do something rash without thinking first."

"Go away!" said the girl again.

"No, I won't. Listen, I'm sorry that happened. I ought not to have allowed it."

"But you did! Because you had eyes only for *her*!"

The man laughed a little. "You're jealous!"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Oh, great! A couple in the middle of a lovers' tiff. This could go on forever. I'd be kicking my heels behind this curtain until I traveled back and suddenly materialized in front of the windows in Mrs. Counter's geography lesson. Maybe I could tell her I'd been doing a physics experiment. Or I'd been there all the time and she just hadn't noticed me.

"The count will wonder where we are," said the man's voice.

"Then he can just send his Transylvanian friend looking for us, that's what your count can do. He's not even really a count. His title's as much of a fake as the rosy cheeks of that . . . what was her name again?" The girl gave an angry little snort through her nose as she spoke.

Somehow or other, I knew that sound. I knew it very well. I cautiously peered out from behind the curtain. The two of them were standing right in front of the door, with their profiles turned to me. The girl really was only a girl, wearing a fantastic dress, midnight blue silk and embroidered brocade, with a skirt so wide she'd probably have trouble getting through a normal doorway in it. She had snow-white hair piled up into a strange sort of mountain on top of her head, with ringlets falling to her shoulders. It

had to be a wig. The man had white hair too, held together with a ribbon at the nape of his neck. In spite of having hair like senior citizens, they both looked very young and very attractive, especially the man. He was more of a boy, really, maybe eighteen or nineteen years old. But staggeringly good-looking. A perfect masculine profile. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I leaned much farther out of my hiding place than I really meant to.

"I've forgotten her name already," said the boy, still laughing.

"Liar!"

"The count's not responsible for Rakoczy's behavior," said the boy, serious again now. "He'll certainly be reprimanded for that. You don't have to like the count, you only have to respect him."

The girl snorted scornfully again, and again it sounded strangely familiar. "I don't *have* to do anything," she said, abruptly turning toward the window. That meant turning to me. I wanted to disappear right behind the curtain, but I froze mid-movement.

This was impossible!

The girl had *my* face. I was looking into my own startled eyes!

She seemed as surprised as I was, but she got over her shock faster. She made a movement with her hand.

Hide! her gesture clearly said. *Disappear!*

Breathing hard, I put my head back behind the curtain. Who was she? There just couldn't be such a likeness between us. I simply *had* to look again.

“What was that?” I heard the boy saying.

“Nothing!” said the girl. Was that by any chance also *my* voice?

“At the window.”

“Nothing, I said.”

“There could be someone standing behind the curtain listening to . . .” Whatever he was saying was cut short by his sound of surprise. Suddenly there was silence. Now what had happened?

Without thinking, I pushed the curtain aside. The girl who looked like me had planted her lips right on the boy’s mouth. He took it passively at first, then he put his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. The girl shut her eyes.

Suddenly there were butterflies dancing in my stomach. It was odd, watching yourself kiss someone. I thought I did it pretty well. I realized that the girl was kissing the boy only to take his mind off me. Nice of her, but why was she doing it? And how was I going to get past them unnoticed?

The butterflies in my stomach turned to a flock of birds in flight, and the picture of the couple kissing blurred before my eyes. And then, suddenly, I was in the Year Six classroom with my nerves in shreds.

All was still.

I’d expected an outcry from all the students when I suddenly appeared, and someone—maybe Mrs. Counter—falling down in a faint with the shock of it.

But the classroom was empty. I groaned with relief. At

least I'd been lucky this time. I dropped into a chair and put my head down on the desk in front of it. What had just happened was more than I could take in for the moment. The girl, the gorgeous guy, the kiss. . . .

The girl hadn't just looked like me.

The girl *was* me.

There was no possible mistake. I'd recognized myself, beyond any shadow of doubt, by the little birthmark in the shape of a half-moon on my temple, the one Aunt Glenda always called Gwenny's funny little banana.

There couldn't be two different people who looked so much alike.