

Chapter 1

Any second now and Mr. Stranger would explode! All the signs were there for anyone to see. The Science teacher had drawn a large breath. His shoulders had pulled back and straightened. A patch, reddening slightly, was spreading across his cheeks, heading for his already crimson ears. He tried to compose himself, it was the last lesson of the day; Yr.10 Science. He did not want to lose it, now, when the day was almost over. He had managed to not lose his cool all day.

But watching the spectacle unfold from the second row of benches, Jules the school 'Boff' knew that the situation was already out of Stranger's control. The boy sitting in front of him was called Ed and he was Jules' best friend. Jules could tell from Ed's attitude going into the lesson that he had no intention of seeing it through. Jules had noticed that lately, as the end of term approached, his friend was getting himself sent out of certain lessons more frequently. It was as if he could not stand them anymore this year.

Then, on cue, Ed dissed the teacher one more time. Stranger rolled his eyes and bellowed in Ed's face.

"That's it! I've had enough! Out you go Edgar!" bits of spit flew from his mouth as his anger took over. Ed did not flinch. He rose from his stool,

shrugged his shoulders and left the lab. without another word. Jules watched his friend leave and sighed to himself.

Ed was quite tall, about 5'11". Not the tallest in Year 10 but easily five inches taller than Jules. Ed had long, straight, black hair which carried on below his shirt collar for quite a few inches. It always looked in need of a wash; even when Jules knew Ed had just washed it, there was a greasy glint in it. A square chin and strong cheekbones helped to give Ed a certain ruggedness that was beginning to attract the attention of the girls - they giggled around him. He flashed his blue eyes mischievously at them, but he did no more. In fact, Jules could not remember Ed ever saying that he fancied anyone in school. Britney, yes! At least, as she was a few years ago; he had said how disappointed he was in her more recent appearance.

Stranger calmed down in stages and quickly wrote some introductory notes on the board. Picking up a textbook he left the lab. to deal with Ed. The class, which was top set Yr.10 Science, began to quietly talk amongst themselves. Jules glanced at the girl next to him. He sighed openly and raised his eyebrows in resignation at Ed's antics. The girl quickly lifted her hand in a gesture of 'hold on' and before Jules could say anything she spoke.

"Before you say anything to try to defend him, Jules." Her voice was firm. "He's a bloody fool. You know it! He made no attempt to stay in the lesson. Right from the start he was pushing Stranger! Every lesson it's the same, lately.

Ed's just looking to get kicked out. He's doing my head in!" taking a breath, "I'm sick and tired of it!"

There was muttering of agreement all around them. "I wasn't going to stick up for him, Rosie." Jules said quietly. "I think he's a bloody idiot too!" Jules saw the nodding heads agreeing. "I don't know what's got into him." He paused. "Must be the end of term - or something." Jules fell silent.

Alongside him the girl Rosie watched Jules closely. She had a feeling that he had more than an idea what was wrong with Ed. But even though they had all been to school together, right from Yr.1: Ed, Jules, Collette and herself. There were some things the boys did not talk about with the girls. At that moment she failed to recognise that there were some things that the girls would not dream of discussing with the boys! There had been subtle changes in their relationships since they had become teenagers. Rosie concentrated on the lesson.

Jules had meant it when he said that Ed was an idiot. The regular performances with Stranger were straining the atmosphere in the class. Unlike every other class, they all did want to get on. The Yr.10 exam they had just taken had been worth 25% of their final grade. It had come as a shock to a lot of them. They felt there was ground to be made up. Jules had not been surprised by the exam and felt he had done well. Rosie, who was the typical hard worker, had revised long hours with Jules. She, too, had emerged from the

exam quietly confident. But others had not been so happy. Ed was getting to be a tiresome distraction.

Jules and Rosie thought that Ed and Stranger had a love-hate relationship. Ed loved to wind Stranger up, forever pushing him with irritating questions and annoying wisecracks. Stranger just hated Ed. Although Jules did not quite believe this. Ed would end up doing a detention after school for Stranger. Almost every time Ed managed to get Stranger to go over what he missed in the lessons. Stranger even got the equipment out and showed Ed the demos he had missed. Despite, or perhaps because of this, Ed regularly came second only to Jules in the tests. Jules knew Ed was bright. Stranger knew Ed was bright. So, did Ed. Unfortunately, he was a pest also.

The main point of the lesson was how sound travelled through media such as solids, liquids and gases. Stranger demoed sucking the air out of a big, sealed glass flask in which an electric bell was ringing. It was successful. When all the air had been removed you could not hear the bell. But when Stranger opened the valve and let the air back in, the sound of the ringing returned. He told them lots of interesting stories about sound generally and they had relatively little to copy from the board. The lesson soon passed, and the end of school bell rang.

Jules got swept along with the crowd of escaping pupils and soon found himself downstairs in the entrance to the Science Block. Ed had stayed behind to see Stranger and Rosie had disappeared. A gang of six or seven boys

emerged from the Boys' Toilets. They were noisy. Jules quickly turned around and began to study the notice board closely. But the boys had spotted him. The smaller, rounder boy opposite them was a welcome target for them. They knew the round-faced boy with just a trace of freckles was the school 'Boff'. His brown hair was parted to one side and ended in slight curls above the collar, the hair matched the eyes. As they watched him play with his parting, his back to them, they knew that he knew they were there, and they also knew he would not hit back.

Jules thought about making a run for it, but he was not a runner. He was still carrying, as his mother had the excruciating habit of reminding him, some 'puppy fat'; Jules was not the most mobile teenager. He knew they would soon catch him outside. No, he was better off inside. They might only mess him about a bit, push him around, ruffle his hair, call him names, pinch him in the arms and legs. At worst they might punch him in the stomach. Try to get him on the floor and kick him.

If he stayed in the entrance perhaps one of the teachers might help him. Perhaps, if they did not ignore the all too common scene. Mr. Stranger would help. But he was dealing with Ed. It was Ed who usually protected him from the bullies. A flash of anger crossed Jules' face at this realisation. Bloody idiot Ed! He thought again.

"Ooo! Look boys! Julian has got his angry face on!" they were upon him. Closing in from three sides they pressed against him. Jules was backed against

the wall. Facing them he recognised the usual gang. They were a mixture of Yr.10 and Yr.11 boys. Most of them were bigger than Jules, apart from two at the front who were doing the most shoving. They were eye level with him. Almost in unison they cried out in what they called a 'gay' way.

"OOOooo Julian! What's a nice boy like you doing here? Hey luvvy?" the pinching started. Jules squirmed and tried to duck.

"Oh, JULIAN, darling, what a good 'Boff' you are." They laughed and roughed his hair up. They acted what they thought was 'gay' as they pushed him about. Some passing younger girls joined in the laughing. A small crowd was gathering to see if there would be a fight. Or maybe a real punch or kick. Possibly some blood.

"Gangway there! Coming through! Watch out! Do take care!" a familiar voice was calling out. Jules heart soared. Then quite suddenly Ed burst through the gang. The two smaller boys in front of Jules were barged onto the floor. They looked up in anger. But the looks turned to scowls, as around them both Ed was pushing the gang away. There were a few angry mutterings and for a second it looked like they might close in again. The watching crowd made a noise of expectation and stepped closer.

"Now who wants to hit my friend Julian?" Ed shouted, loudly. He mimicked their 'gay' way of saying 'Julian'. Some of the gang smiled. But as Ed gazed strongly at all of them in turn, the smiles slipped off their faces.

"How about you, Big Dan?" Ed picked on the leader and the biggest boy in the group. He was a Yr.11 hard, but under the forceful gaze of Ed he seemed suddenly unsure of himself. The others backed off more as Ed put his hand on Big Dan's shoulder. The older boy was a few inches bigger than Ed. But he was thinner, more gangly; Ed had the thicker physique. The group watching felt Ed had the greater strength. As he spoke Ed increased his grip on Big Dan's shoulder.

"Do you want to hit my friend?" he asked again. Big Dan said nothing. He stared with hatred into Ed's eyes. But he winced as Ed tightened his grip further.

"Now I will ask you again, Big Dan. Do you want to hit my friend?" now there was a quiet menace in Ed's voice. He seemed to have got taller, suddenly. His other hand had formed a fist which was slowly moving up towards Big Dan's face. Big Dan could see the fist. Hatred swept across his face once more. But Ed could see the fear in the bully's eyes.

"NO!" Big Dan spat out the word.

"Anyone else?" Ed scanned the gang's faces. Some mumbled "no", others shook their heads. They all backed away another step.

"Good!" Ed laughed loudly and slapped Big Dan hard on the side of his face. Jules enjoyed the look of disbelief on Big Dan's face. He also enjoyed the gasps of the crowd as Ed slapped him again on the other cheek. Big Dan staggered momentarily, then, his face a picture of rage, he took a step closer to Ed. But

Ed stood there, fists at the ready, "come on you bully! Come and get some!" Big Dan stopped in his tracks and some of the anger left his face. He was breathing heavily while the crowd held their breaths. Then with another great laugh Ed pushed him right over. Big Dan crashed through the younger girls and hit the floor heavily while the others scattered. Ed stood over Big Dan. The prone boy made no attempt to get up.

"Right everyone, move along here. Go home. Nothing to see here. Move along." It was Stranger. Jules felt he was doing a good impression of the cops in 'Police Squad!' off the telly. "Move along there. Nothing to see here." Soon, only Jules, Ed and Stranger were left in the entrance.

"Thanks, Ed." Jules said to his friend.

"Can't take you anywhere." Ed joked.

"Are you alright, Jules?" Stranger asked him.

"I am now, Sir." He smiled his thanks at Ed.

"Well, go on home then, the two of you." Stranger told them. Then as they reached the door he added, "remember I want to see you in my lab. after school tomorrow, Ed." Stranger had a funny sort of smile on his face.

"Yes, Sir," Ed answered cheerfully.

Once they were outside and the door had shut Jules turned to Ed and joked, "I think Stranger fancies you."

"Don't talk wet," Jules smarted. Ed laughed and then added, "JULIAN", in his 'gayest' voice. Jules scowled, then he laughed too.

"Anyway, I reckon Stranger likes Britney," Ed offered.

"How do you make that out?"

"Something he said when he gave me my 'FHM' back."

"He gave you your 'FHM' back!" Jules repeated. "What did he say?"

"Nothing, really," Ed teased, "I'm not telling."

"Oh! Come on Ed! What did he say?"

But Ed said no more. They were not going home, however. They made their way across the yard to the tennis courts. A crowd of about fifty kids were already gathered there.

As they crossed the yard Jules tried to see if any of the gang had gone to the tennis courts. He could not recognise any of them. They would not stay behind after school to support the netball team. That was just not a cool thing to do! Jules tried to relax. They were halfway across the yard when, suddenly, they heard running behind them. They turned swiftly around expecting some attack. But two grinning girls streaked past them on either side. As they passed, each girl, with one hand on the nearest of the boys' shoulders, pushed off and jumped into the air. As they came back down, they used the same hand to push the boy's heads forward, roughly. The boys tottered and stumbled. Jules was pleased to see Ed taken more by surprise and rocking, almost falling forward. The girls landed lightly and laughing called back, "wait for us after the game." Still laughing, they hurried off towards the changing rooms.

Jules watched Rosie and Collette disappear. Ed muttered something about "bloody girls". Jules glanced at him.

"Gone off them, have you?" Jules asked half seriously.

"I prefer them older." Ed answered. There was almost a tone of derision in his voice. "Those two will be alright when they've grown up a bit." Jules looked closely at his friend. He remembered that one of the older girls had shown an interest in him earlier in the year. Even now as they arrived at the tennis courts girls of all years were casting him admiring looks. But Ed seemed to be impervious to them.

One of the women P.E. teachers was keeping the crowd out of the courts. So, Jules and Ed joined a group of boys at one end of the courts and waited by the fences. Soon the opposition came out and did some warm-up exercises in the court. They practised their shooting and passing. The watching crowd had hissed lowly at them and booed them quietly. The P.E. teacher frowned at anyone going too far. Jules and Ed stood with their hands holding the wire fences; just like all the other boys. There were some comments about the girls from the other school. Jules noted the worst came from the girls watching.

"Bitchy, or what?" Ed said to Jules. There was no time to respond. The home team had entered the court. Collette led, followed by Rosie and the other team members. The crowd cheered and whistled. Encouragement came from all sides as the watchers pressed closer to the fences. There were a few words exchanged amongst the boys. Most agreed that their girls were the best looking.

Jules watched Collette, as Captain, go up for the handshake with her opposite number. She was as tall as Ed; something he was sure that Ed had never appreciated for some reason. She was beautiful. She reminded him of those classical Greek statues, especially in the face; however, her hair was different. It was naturally very blond; she wore it in a sort of short page-boy style with a square fringe. At least that was what Rosie had told him. There were lovely blue-grey eyes that too readily and too quickly flashed in anger; especially when things were not going her way. Rosie, Ed and Jules were used to her. They had grown up together after all, been in the same class all through Primary and Junior school.

As the match was about to start many watchers admired her gymnastic gracefulness and noticed the athletic strength in her frame. Not just the boys either, some of the girls looked longingly at her. To Jules she seemed like that Russian tennis player who had won Wimbledon. But Collette was not quite so tall, less leggy, and it had to be said, not quite so big in the chest. Looking around Jules could see the other boys watching the players closely. Some making no attempt to hide their leering. The girls on the court did not seem to mind. To Jules some of them seemed to enjoy it. Some of the girls at the fences took exception to some of the comments. They tried to remonstrate with the worst offenders. But the boys took no notice and the teachers were too involved with the game to care.

From the beginning the game was played at a furious pace - it was a grudge match. The other team had knocked the home side out of the cup only three weeks ago. Now the home side needed to win this game to clinch the League. Both teams were very skillful and moved the ball around well. Both shooters were accurate; Collette had missed one more than the away shooter. The scores were rising.

"You know, that Collette girl's really fit!" the boy next to Jules said as the half time whistle went.

"Yeah," Jules agreed. "You should see her run. Does everything up to 400 metres." Without stopping he went on. "She's a county netball and hockey player, a national runner and gymnast. She's also ..." He faltered. The boy next to him and the line of boys beyond him were leaning off the fence, grinning at him. There was a burst of laughter from behind Jules and then all the boys broke out in great loud guffaws of laughter. The boys the other side of Ed joined in. Jules went scarlet instantly. They laughed even louder. The boy who had spoken first gave Jules a playful slap on the back.

"Yeah. We know what you mean. She's really fit!" they all laughed again. Jules cast a swift glance sideways at Ed. He was also laughing but he shook his head slightly and looked disbelievingly back at him.

"She could be a model when she's older." Another boy said.

"She's had some offers." Jules hastily cried out. Trying to regain some ground.

"How do you know?" the boy asked.

"Well, she is my friend." Jules replied. "I've known her since Year 1."

"Yeah. Sure." The first boy said. "And how long have you been going out with her? In your mind of course." The others sniggered.

"I didn't say she was my girlfriend, just my friend." Jules reacted strongly. He looked to Ed for some support. But Ed was busy watching the P.E. teachers coaching the girls during the break.

"Yeah. Sure." The boy repeated. Gradually the mirth died away. But Jules face was still red.

"I think that Rosie girl is better looking anyway." A different boy said.

"Yeah. I do too." Another one agreed. "She's well developed. You know what I mean?" he grinned at his mates. They nodded back enthusiastically.

Jules and Ed looked at each other. A quizzical look passed between them.

Then they turned to look at Rosie as if for the first time.

She was stood hands on hips listening to the teachers. She came up to Collette's shoulder beside her. They were all sweating heavily. The boys could feel the hot, July afternoon Sun on their backs and necks. Rosie had long tawny coloured hair that was usually tied up in a bun or in a long ponytail down her back. She had an oval face with bright brown eyes. She was curvier than Collette and she was more developed. Ed thought, now, for the first time it seemed, that she reminded him of a fuller figured Kylie. She looked fit too, in the Jules sense of the word. She was the engine of the team. Jules was

struggling with thinking of Rosie as attractive. He could see what the other boys meant. But he had trouble seeing past the girl he helped with her homework. He could not rid himself of an indefinable, uncomfortable feeling for the rest of the game.

The game swung first one way and then the other. But always the opposition shooter just managed to score more than Collette. The crowd watching became more raucous in their support, screaming at the players. Trying to push their own team to greater efforts. Trying to intimidate and discourage the opposition. The game was stopped a couple of times when the teachers felt some of the comments went too far - the offenders were duly admonished. There were only minutes to go when both Ed and Jules realised that Collette was going to blow any second. Almost immediately she screamed at her teammates in frustration. Around the fences the kids gasped at each other in surprise. The teachers looked warily at her.

In the last few minutes the team, and Rosie particularly, gave it their all. Collette scored; but she also missed. The anguish was there for all to see as the final whistle was blown. The home side had lost by one score. They slumped to the ground in complete exhaustion and disappointment. The winners however, buoyed by their success, jumped around hugging each other. The home crowd booed at first then after a while they more sportingly clapped the players. Quite quickly the crowd drifted off home. Jules and Ed stayed and watched the teachers and the girls all shake hands.

"That Collette girl's not going to cry, is she?" one other boy had remained.

"No!" Ed and Jules exclaimed together. They knew Collette hated to lose.

But she would not cry in public. Perhaps in the showers with Rosie comforting her, or maybe when they walked home later. The last boy walked away.

"You will wait for us, won't you?" Rosie called to them before she went into the changing rooms.

"Of course, we will." Jules assured her. She smiled at him and then pursed her lips as she looked beyond him at Ed. Ed was looking very intently at one of the away team's teachers. There was something vaguely familiar about her. Then it hit Jules. She reminded him of Britney in that video with the red jump suit thing. Judging by the wistful look on Ed's face he guessed his friend agreed.

Chapter 2

The boys had to wait for about half an hour before the girls came back out.

Everyone else had gone home. The away team had left in their minibus. The other home players had also departed; their spirits apparently still high. The afternoon Sun seemed to be getting stronger. There was no shade and the boys were overheating. Finally, Rosie and Collette came out with the last P.E. teacher. They said their goodbyes and the teacher locked up.

"We're going to the shop first," Ed informed them. "We need an ice cream."

"Me too," Rosie agreed hungrily. Jules smiled at her. The girls had obviously showered, but they were still red-faced from their exertions in the game.

"Oh," Collette said rather lamely, "I've spent all my money today already."

"Well, that's you out of it then," Ed, quick as a flash. He was leading the way. He did not look back. Rosie and Jules followed him. They smiled almost slyly at each other. Collette had halted, she frowned at the backs of her friends, but they kept going. So, she quickly closed the distance between them. None of them spoke as they neared the shop.

Collette never seemed to have much money with her; she always seemed to have spent it already. The others found this funny considering that Collette's family was by far the richest of all their families. Obviously, considering the circumstances of the boys' parents; they were much poorer than the girls. But

then Rosie's family were not close to Collette's in financial terms; far ahead of the boys but behind Collette's.

Ed always had some money with him. His dad was a single parent. Very little was known about Ed's mother; at least he had never told them many details. Ed's dad did not have a regular job: sometimes he drove for people, acted as a sort of courier. But Ed never met these people. Mostly though, Ed's dad spent his time in the Bookies, or the pub. The occasional jobs were very lucrative, or maybe he was very successful with his gambling, either way, Ed did not lack for money. He had enough to keep any reasonable teenager happy. He had the latest mobile, computer, games, CDs and DVDs, trainers and so on. However, Ed was also very generous with his money. He often bought sweets, chocolates and drinks for his friends. Especially Jules, who he considered to be worse off than him. Jules did not mind, nor did the girls. Ed was also kind to other children he did not know so well.

Rosie had some sympathy for Collette. Her own parents were not happy giving her lots of money to go to school with. They appreciated that their background was much wealthier than almost all the other kids at their school and they did not want to attract any unnecessary attention to their daughter. Rosie, Collette too, did not appear any different to all the other girls, on the surface at least. Scratch a little and then you might tell them from the others in their detached and semi-detached houses, or terraces, or tower blocks. True, Rosie and Collette did not mix much with the other girls out of school; but in

school they were accepted. Being good at sport and strongly academic kept them out of likely flashpoints.

It was an extreme quirk of catchment boundaries that drove Rosie and Collette to be part of the same area as Ed and Jules. The boys, it could be said, represented the other extreme of the background range that spanned their school. It was to their credit, perhaps, that the parents of the girls had not sent them away to school. However, having been through that experience themselves, they were loath to repeat it for their children. So, their children went to the local State School and with some careful help they let them get on with it. They knew the boys and were familiar with their circumstances. But the boys had not visited the girls since the early years. Relations were cordial enough. However, the boys were sure that the girls' parents had never exchanged more than the occasional word with their parents. In a kind of 'rough boy' way they felt they were good for the girls. Keeping their feet on the ground. Giving them a common touch, that sort of thing. They little realised how pompous, even vain, that made them.

As expected, at the shop, Ed bought everyone ice creams or ice lollies. He also bought a large bottle of limeade to share amongst them. Jules thought again how it seemed that Ed had an aversion to having money in his pocket for too long. Almost as if his uncertainty at how his dad had 'earned' it, made him want to spend it quickly. As Jules was, most often, the recipient of this generosity, he was quite happy with this attitude.

Jules knew the others considered him the poorest; it was true. Ed did seem to have that bit more cash than him, but Jules in turn did not want for much. He had his computer, broadband internet, mobile and most importantly all the books he needed. A true 'Boff' needed the resources to back up all that hard work, all that swotting that maintained his position at the top of the school academic tree. His mother, the only parent that Jules had known, made sure he had everything he required for school. It appeared to Jules, and Ed, that this was sometimes at a cost to his mother. A cost to which Jules did not want to think about. A cost that Ed would not talk about either.

The friends made their way through the outer suburbs that lay to one side of the school. For Jules and Ed this was the long way home. But they had always gone this way, to accompany the girls, since they had come to senior school. They called out to other friends as they went. Some in their gardens, some hanging out of their bedrooms, some walking or cycling by. As they walked, they began to talk about what they might do this summer. The girls had plans to go off on holidays with their parents. The boys would not be doing this.

"Are you going to see that Professor person tonight Jules?" Rosie asked.

"Yeah, I'm going after my tea. He's got some interesting old texts and scripts to show me." Jules almost gushed in excitement.

"He's a perv." Collette said bluntly.

"He is not!" Jules bristled.

"He is!" Collette retorted. Jules gave an exasperated snort.

"He is a perv. He's always looking at me in a funny way," Collette continued. Rosie and Ed let slip a few giggles. Both Jules and Collette glared at them.

"He is not a perv!" Jules was adamant. "And anyway, everybody looks at you! All the boys in school, especially the older ones. The sixth formers." Collette could not hide a smile at this.

"Blokes going past in cars beep their horns at you. Workmen wolf whistle you." Jules pressed on. Collette was not so happy at this. A frown replaced the smile.

"You love it really." Jules had finished.

"I do not!" Collette was indignant. Rosie and Ed burst out laughing. Gradually Jules and Collette lost the glower from their faces and joined in the laughing.

Eventually Rosie spoke, "I have to admit I like the older boys looking at me." Giving Collette a wink, "especially you know who!" Collette grinned. It was the boys turn to frown. They thought they knew who Rosie meant, but she would not tell them anymore. Instead she changed the subject.

"Are you still doing tests and things for this Professor? On old languages and stuff?" Jules nodded. He tried to put a superior kind of look on his face.

"You will not find me doing any extra work like that, out of school," Collette scoffed. Spoken like the true 'just enough to get through' person that she was, thought Jules.

Soon they passed the last house. They followed the road for a few hundred yards. There were farmer's fields to the left side. Rougher, slightly wooded common land to the other side. A small stream had started to cut a small channel the other side of the hedge on their left. Ahead they could see the start of the densely wooded area that formed the barrier between the homes of the girls and the boys. The widening stream ran into a culvert ahead, which allowed it to duck under the lane that lead off to the left away from the main road. Here a large off roader four-wheel drive waited.

The girls waved as they approached the vehicle. A woman got out and waved back to them. If you did not already know, then it would have been obvious to see that this woman was Collette's mother. The boys had seen her before, many times. However, it always struck them how alike mother and daughter were. Jules glanced at Ed. As he suspected, he had that look on his face again. The same look with which he had gazed at the P.E. teacher, less than an hour or two ago. Jules wondered if that was what desire looked like; or was it lust? He also wondered if he would ever have that look on his face, for a girl or a woman.

The boys said goodbye and carried on along the main road. The off roader carried the girls down the lane and around the other side of the woods to the exclusive estate where they lived. It was at least two miles as you followed the lane, skirting the woods. In the distance ahead of the boys the road straightened out. On their left were the ruins of a terrace of houses that ended in one

remaining habitable structure; Jules' house. The woods pressed against the ruins.

Further down the road, about two hundred yards on from Jules' house, lay Ed's house. Its position was symmetrical to Jules'. It held a mirror image place at the end of another destroyed terrace of houses that carried on down the road. Between the two houses ran a high stone wall. Occasionally there were breaks in the wall. The woods towered over the wall, thick bushes and brambles tried to escape through the breaches in the wall, almost purposely preventing anyone entering there. The height of the wall and the proximity of the trees discouraged attempts to scale it.

On the right side of the road lay a wasteland. An area of land generally covered in bushes, brambles and weeds which grew to great heights. There were a few mounds dotted about. Remnants of the construction that had produced the series of tower blocks that began three quarters of a mile away. The odd tree had sprung up here and there. There were also four burnt out wrecks of stolen cars, rusting away. Around them and elsewhere were strewn the discarded rubbish of everyday life: every kind of plastic bag; tins of drink; cardboard and paper rotting into the ground; car and bicycle tires; a few fridges and cookers. So, it went on: all forms of corroding metals could be found there; paper products riddled with worms and plastics that would not breakdown and degrade; also, if you chose to look closely enough, you would find used

condoms and needles. A thousand years from now it might be a treasure trove for archaeologists. But, then again, it might be just one of thousands.

The boys had now reached Jules' house. It was complete. The house that formed its neighbour, originally, had collapsed at some time. But it was clear that somebody in the past had acted to shore up what would have been the inside connecting walls; extra brickwork was apparent. The roof had also been worked on and sealed. There was no front garden. At the back, a small garden and a low wall were trying to fight off the advances of the encroaching wood. At the side, the house was built onto the high wall. The wall made a right angle here. After forming part of the house structure, it continued into the wood. The boys knew that inside the wood it lost its integrity; there were many places where it crumbled under the assault of the various trees and bushes, although the thickness of the growth did not allow for any easy passage. So, an effective barrier remained. The stream, released from the culvert under the lane, dived once more into a man-made channel under the wall.

As the boys talked a taxi pulled up. Jules' mother got out. She handed the driver a twenty-pound note, and the taxi drove off down the road.

"Oh, Jules!" she cried out. "My lovely clever boy." She hugged her son and gave him a kiss on his cheek. Her son squirmed under the embrace but made no attempt to get away.

"Have you just come home from school?" she glanced at a thin watch on her wrist.

"Yes, Mum. We stayed to watch the girls play netball." Jules answered.

"Hello Ed, how are you?" she turned to face him.

"I'm fine Mrs. Trull, thank you." Luckily, she did not hug him as well. Mrs. Trull had stopped that habit a few years ago - Ed was grateful, it had been embarrassing for him, let alone Jules. Ed could see that Mrs. Trull was wearing a short skirt. Too short for a woman of her age he felt. It looked like there were stockings underneath. Her blouse was open and pushed her breasts out where no one could fail to notice them. Her face had too much make-up: the eyeliner, mascara and lipstick were too bright. She was now occupied in tidying up the smudges of lipstick from her cheeks and around her mouth. Ed felt this was being done as if in response to her hug with Jules. But he had noticed this slight state of disrepair when she had got out of the taxi.

"Only one week to go to the holidays, hey boys!" she said to them as she put her key into the door. "Can't wait, I expect."

"Can't wait." Ed echoed her with some enthusiasm. Jules said nothing. He liked school. He liked learning things. Even if he was bullied at times.

"Did they win?" Mrs. Trull had stepped through the doorway.

"What, Mum?"

"Did they win? The girls, at netball."

"No. They just lost. Good game though."

"I bet that did not please that Collette girl."

"No, it didn't." Jules smiled at Ed.

"She's an attractive girl, that Collette." Ed noticed that Mrs. Trull glanced quickly at him as she said this. "But I think that Rosie is nicer. She'll be prettier, too, in the long run, I think, anyway." She moved down the corridor into the house. "Tea in an hour Jules." She called back to him.

"Right, Mum." He shrugged his shoulders at Ed's wide-eyed questioning look. The two boys stared at each other for a moment. Then they looked away at the same time. Ed knew that they had an unspoken agreement not to discuss their parents in any detail. Both boys knew Jules' mother was a prostitute and a druggie too. Ed remembered the slowly unfolding look of horror on his friend's face as they sat through a drugs awareness lesson. Jules recognising the symptoms and signs in his mother. At least his mother had tried hard to control her habit once Jules had confronted her. As for the other thing, Ed was glad that Mrs. Trull did not bring her work home. Judging by the twenty quid she was also plying her trade well away from their home. But the boys did not talk about it.

Ed could not take any 'I'm better than you,' stance anyway. Even if he wanted to, which he didn't. What could you say about his dad? He was probably a crook. A gambler, most definitely. Certainly, a drinker. But not a druggie as far as Ed could tell. He had searched around for anything to do with drugs and found nothing. His dad did not smoke; fags or dope. Ed was glad of this. Ed particularly hated the smell of dope. It was bad enough, the stink of it

on some kids at school and on buses. He would not have put up with it at home too.

"Will your dad be home now?" Jules asked Ed.

"Are you joking?" he laughed. "A beautiful Summer's day like this. He'll still be sat in the pub garden." He paused, glanced at his watch. "Mind you, he might be home sleeping it off by now." He headed off down the road.

"Later." Jules called after him.

"Later." Ed called back, raising his hand into the air behind him.

Chapter 3

Inside the house Jules made some tea for his mother. She asked him about his day, how school had gone, whether he had any test scores to report. Jules did not ask his mother how her day had been. As they talked Mrs. Trull prepared their meal. After finishing his cup of tea Jules went to his room. Soon after, he heard his mother come upstairs and take a shower. Jules began reading another chapter in a rather thick book that lay open on his bed. It was a book on ancient mythologies that the Professor had lent him.

Jules' room was at the back of the house, facing the wood. He had very little by way of a view. Just trees, bushes and the wall to the side. Occasionally if the branches swayed in the wind, he caught a glimpse of the stream. In Winter when the leaves had fallen, he could see much further into the wood. Even now in the Summer the light was not good in his room. The high wall and pressing trees cut a lot of sunlight out. The light bulbs in his room were on most of the time.

In a corner near the window was all the computer gear. A swivel chair allowed him to turn from the screen to a view of the back. Connections spread out along the wall. Eventually they led to the dish and telephone lines on the roof. Beside the computer a large TV and video/DVD were wired up together. A red LED light showed Jules that his timed recording of a 'Discovery' program

was underway. A wardrobe and a chest of drawers, containing all his clothes, lined the wall opposite the window. His bed lay in between. All around: piled up against the walls and the bed; strewn across the floor; swamping a music centre, were books. Various sizes and thicknesses; some in different languages. Sprinkled amongst them were magazines covering Science, Astronomy, Archaeology and History.

Jules was sprawled across his bed contemplating the similarities in all these ancient myths from around the world. He thought again about something the Professor mentioned once. It was concerning the idea that a single, very old civilisation had started everything off. All other flowering of human activity had resulted from this one original source - the myth of Atlantis was wrapped up in it somewhere. But there was the other idea, that it was just the way it was. That civilisations in different places around the world, and at different times, just naturally developed along the same lines. It was evolution, or something like it.

The sudden burst of noise from his mobile made Jules jump. He reached for it. Ed was texting him to turn his webcam on. Jules got up and used the mouse to make the connection. As soon as he was linked to his friend, just down the road from him, a loud 'JULIAN' greeted him. Jules reflexively scowled into his webcam. But there was no sign of Ed on the other end. He could hear him, but he was not facing his webcam.

"Get your head out of that bloody book!" Ed shouted forcefully. "A boy of your age should be looking at this sort of thing." Ed then used his webcam to show Jules some of the posters on his bedroom walls. Jules knew his walls were completely covered in posters of popstars, female of course, and actresses. There were some models too. But not the stick insect kind. Jules did not approve of them, also. As the webcam slewed from one picture to another Ed gave a running commentary. It was often dirty and contained many of the thoughts and ideas that teenage boys obsessed over. Jules thought he was no different. He often fancied a 'Helen of Troy' figure coming into his life. Or, discovering some nymphets in the back garden. Mind you, they would probably have to be blind or something. At the least not very choosy.

"Whoa!" Jules cried out. "That's a new one ... There ... Back a bit ... That's it!" it was a picture of Britney that you would not expect to see in the shops.

"That's never real Ed. Where'd you get that?"

"Got it from a 'special' website in the US." Ed tried to sound mysterious.

"Pretty good, hey!" Ed grinned at him. He had put the webcam back on top of his monitor. "I've put it so that it's the last thing I see before I switch the lights out! Know what I mean! Man!" he leered in an over the top, pervy way. Jules shook his head and grinned at his friend.

"They've put that together." Jules carried on. "She'd never let that sort of thing happen. I mean it looks really good, must have taken a bit of doing." Ed feigned a hurt look.

"How do you now? Perhaps this is just the next stage in her fall from grace."

Ed persisted.

"Yeah ... Sure ... I bet you'd like her to fall into your bedroom!" Jules could not stop himself giggling at the look on Ed's face.

"Well of course! What young man wouldn't?" he looked directly into the webcam. "Maybe even a bookish 'Boff' like you?" Ed winked. Jules had felt a slight sensation in his groin at the sight of the image. He was saved from answering Ed because a sudden tone told him that an email had arrived for him. He turned his attention to it.

"Who's that from?" Ed asked.

"Rosie."

"What does she want now?"

"Help with our last homework of the year."

"Homework! We haven't got any more homework."

"It's German."

"Oh!" Ed did not do German. He had been thrown off the course at Easter - languages were not for him he had declared. He was not going to live or work abroad. Besides everyone knew the whole world spoke English now. Jules was tapping away on the keys.

"Is it going to take long?" Ed asked.

"No." There was a pause.

"Why doesn't she get Collette to help her, anyway?" Ed again.

"Are you kidding?" Jules had stopped typing. "She didn't even know we had homework! Rosie will pass the answer on to her. I bet." He hit the send button.

"There, it's done." Ed could see the look of satisfaction on Jules' face. Very occasionally he wished he was more like his best friend. But the feeling soon passed. He was happy the way he was, and he was sure Jules was happy the way he was too.

"What you got to eat tonight?" Ed enquired.

"Toad-in-the-hole."

"Anything with it?"

"Mash, some salad, I think. What are you having?"

"Oh, just some boil-in-the-bags out of the freezer."

"Is your dad there?"

"Yeah. He's crashed out on the sofa. Had a long afternoon by the look of it." Jules nodded his understanding. "Listen, I'd better get on with it, actually. See you in the den later?"

"Sure." Jules nodded vigorously. "I'll come after I've been to the Professors."

"When will that be?"

"I don't know exactly. About nineish, bit earlier maybe."

"OK. See you later."

"Righto!"

"Oh, good luck with the test."

"Thanks," Jules beamed. But Ed had gone, and his mother was calling him.

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It was around seven when Jules walked out of his front door. He headed in the direction of Ed's house. He could see it in the distance, like his, built onto the high wall as it made a right angle. There did not appear to be any other buildings between the two houses. But as Jules skirted some outgrowing brambles, a small uniform break in the wall could be seen ahead. It was exactly halfway between the boys' houses. Jules reached it. The indentation was an opening; two yards deep with an arched top. A heavy looking, black painted, metal fronted door presented itself. Jules stepped into the niche and rang the doorbell. He also knocked loudly, using the gargoyle shaped doorknob. He knew that sometimes the Professor did not hear the bell clearly.

But this evening the door opened almost immediately. Jules, taken a little by surprise, stepped back a pace.

"Ah! My boy! Good! Good! You've come! Come in! Come in, quickly!" the old man ushered Jules inside. He always greeted him as if he had not really believed he would return. Jules noticed that the Professor stepped past him and

looked up and down the road. He also looked across at the wasteland before he came back and closed the door behind him. Jules smiled at the old man. He seemed more tired and strained than normal. His thick glasses sat precariously on his nose. He had tight, wiry, dirty grey hair that thinly clung to his head. He was thin in the face and resembled, to Jules, that actor who played 'Sherlock Holmes' in the TV series. His eyes positively gleamed at Jules from behind the thick lenses. Jules hoped he would have the same zestful look in his eyes when he was that old.

"Come on then, Jules." The Professor said as he led the way upstairs. Jules followed. The smell of pipe smoke was everywhere. It had thoroughly permeated the clothes that the Professor wore. Jules had never seen him without a cardigan on. Thankfully he had quite a few. Otherwise Jules would have felt compelled to tell him to change. Cardigans were very good for keeping things in. The pockets, you see, he had informed Jules soon after he had met him, for pipe, tobacco, matches, pipe cleaner, pens, pencils, rubbers and so on.

There had been one tricky moment between them, early in their relationship. After a succession of visits where Jules had noticed that the Professor was smelling a little ripe; he had been excitedly pursuing some studies at the time. Jules remarked that the Professor was smelling like one of the boys in school who had forgotten to use deodorant. The Professor stopped what he was doing. He stared at Jules for a long minute, like a huge owl. Jules feared he had gone

too far. Then, suddenly, the Professor left what he had been working on. He immediately had a bath. He emerged soon after with what Jules supposed was a complete change of clothes and he had shaved properly too. By the time Jules left later that evening, the new cardigan was already smelling of pipe smoke. But Jules had become accustomed to that.

The house where the Professor lived had originally been the Lodge House for a considerable country estate. The 'Big House' and all the other buildings had been completely stripped down a long time ago. There was no trace of them above ground. The Professor had said there were some foundations, still, underground. As he had said this, he waved vaguely to the woods at the back of the house and the posh estate, where the girls lived, beyond. This had happened, as far as Jules could tell, sometime in the early 1800's. The Professor was reluctant to answer every question Jules had. The high wall was built soon after, presumably to enclose the old site for some reason. The Lodge building was the only one left standing. The Professor would not tell him how long he had been living there. There was a plan somewhere showing the layout of the old estate. However, the Professor had never managed to find it.

As time passed the woods grew. The Professor hinted that it had been partly planted to some design. If that was the case, thought Jules, then Nature had obviously had other ideas since. Jules looked out of the back window onto the wildness of the wood and the undergrowth. There was no pattern that he could see. He could see almost the full extent of the area enclosed by the walls. The

room he was in was three floors up and the window was very large. It was inlaid with lead, but you could clearly see out, when you were close to it. He could make out where the stream flowed. He wondered again if the stream had arrived after the walls.

The walls enclosed an area about the size of a large football pitch. On this side lay the boys' houses at the corners. The Lodge and the Professor in the middle. On the other side the wall seemed higher and it was without doubt in a much better state. The trees, there, had not been allowed to get too close to the wall. Over the years someone had cut down and trimmed the trees. They had not been able to get close enough to damage the wall. On the corner directly linked to Jules' house by the wall, lay the house of Rosie and her family. It was not a house like Jules' terrace home. It was more like a small country mansion which rose four storeys high and incorporated the wall into its structure.

Rosie's home rose above the wall whereas the boys' houses seemed to lie in its shadow. Jules could see a light in a room on the top floor. Perhaps Rosie was finishing her German homework, a massive picture of Beckham smiling down at her.

At the other corner Collette's mansion house rose to the same height. Jules remembered that it was a bigger house than Rosie's. More rooms and a bigger drive and garage area. He and Ed had not seen it since they were six; but they had seen photos. Between the girls' houses, hidden behind and below the wall, lay a line of bungalows. Wealthy retired couples lived there. Jules knew

nothing more about them. There were no lights shining at the back of Collette's house. She was probably training, Jules thought. It was Friday night, nevertheless Collette would be doing some exercise or other training activity. Jules realised, as if for the first time, that she did a lot of work in her spare time, also. He was studying here with the Professor. She was out there somewhere with a coach. He hoped Rosie had passed the German homework on.

A loud exaggerated cough and clearing of his throat by the Professor brought Jules out of his musings. He turned from the window. The entire top floor of the Lodge was one big room. Opposite him a smaller window looked out onto the main road. It had a few boards nailed into it. Repairs needed because of the accuracy of stone throwing kids from the tower blocks. Ed and Jules knew them. For some reason they had not done the same to their houses. Yet. The Professor had cleared a space on the massive table that filled the centre of the room. It was piled high with books, published papers, manuscripts, scraps of paper with all manner of writings on them. As he walked past a moment ago Jules had recognised various Sumerian scripts and texts, Egyptian hieroglyphs, ancient Greek, Aztec glyphs and Anglo-Saxon. There were also a dozen European languages in view.

"Ready for the test Julian?" the Professor asked his prodigy. He thanked the Lord again for the day this lad, quite literally, fell into his life. It was just an expression; he did not believe in the existence of deities. A few years had passed and more than ever, he was convinced that this small rounded lad with a

slightly mousey look to him, would be the saviour of the Order. The one to follow in his footsteps and continue his work. He had never experienced a student so brilliant and prodigious. In less than a year he had mastered Latin and Greek. This year he had learnt huge amounts of the Nordic and Germanic languages: ancient and modern. To use some of these modern words, this boy had a brain like a vast database. Information went straight in and was permanently stored. Invariably, he could retrieve the knowledge almost instantly. But he was more than just some data machine. He had a flair for language. He had an amazing ability to find the meaning or make the correct translation; the Professor had met no one better and he had taught at Oxbridge and other fine universities around the world. The boy had managed all this and more and yet his schoolwork never suffered.

Jules began the test. It had been word processed. He smiled as he remembered Ed explaining to the Professor how to do it. It had not been long after Jules had persuaded the Professor to buy a computer, become computer literate and get online. The old scholar had been amazed at the internet. Jules reckoned it had caused an increase in the old man's already vast workload. Their three computers were directly linked. Ed was not particularly interested in the Professor - all those books and all that studying was quite off-putting to him - but if the Professor needed some technical help he did not hesitate to help. The Professor was very grateful. He had tried to encourage Ed to be more academic but had soon realised his efforts were futile.

The aged academic watched his pupil for a short while as he began answering the test. He, soon, could tell that he would drop few marks, as usual. He walked over to the window, holding his glasses he squinted out at the wasteland opposite. He rubbed his tired eyes and looked again. They were still there. He sighed. Too loudly. Behind him he sensed the boy watching him. He said nothing and kept looking towards a dilapidated car that had been parked amongst the burnt-out wrecks. He had not noticed its arrival and so did not know how long they had been there; he only knew that the car had not moved for the last three hours.

The Professor wondered what had happened. What development, that he was not yet aware of, had occurred? Had someone talked? Few people knew what was going on here. The Order was stretched, across the world. Most of them were too old now. He was a prime example! They needed new blood. He was very close to solving one mystery but there were many more to tackle. Their resources were dwindling, and their opponents were becoming stronger. Wealthier.

He could not stop another loud sigh escaping his lips and wondered again that if he could see any of the people inside the car, whether they would be familiar to him. He felt sure they were unlikely to try anything until they knew he had finished his present task. Somehow, they always knew when he was close to, or had achieved a breakthrough. How did they know?

The Order had a serious security leak.

A mole. A very well-placed mole.

Almost certainly a trusted and old colleague. But who?

"What's with the big sighs, Professor?" he must have made another one.

Turning to face the bright lad he realised that he had finished. He checked his pocket watch. It had taken him a quarter of an hour.

"Oh, nothing my boy. Nothing. Just an old man's worries." He smiled at Jules. "What's your answer to number eighteen?" Jules gave his answer in Greek. The Professor nodded and smiled again. If the lad was going to get one wrong, it would have been that one. But he had coped easily. The old man walked over to the table and gave the boy's test paper a quick scan.

"No problems, I see." It was more a statement than a question. Jules shook his head. "When did you learn this?" the Professor flapped the paper in his hand.

"Last Friday night." Jules replied.

"The night I gave it to you?" Jules smiled and nodded.

"Do you want some tea?" the Professor asked him. "We will have a cup and then we will start where we left off, last time." He went down the stairs to the kitchen. Jules did not want a cup of tea at that moment. He had not long finished one with his mother. But he knew that the old man would make him a cup whatever he said. Getting up, he crossed to the patched-up window. Was there something outside that had made the Professor sigh so much?

He did not see it at first, the new beat-up car on the tip. But a Magpie pair got too close and lifted into the air in raucous unison. It was not unusual to see cars parked up like that. It was probably a couple having sex. Or people smoking or waiting to do a deal. Druggies, pushers and shaggers; nothing new there he thought. He hoped they caught some nasty disease, or died of an overdose, or ... whatever. The Professor was back with a tray. Jules forced himself to drink the tea and eat a stale biscuit. He dunked the biscuit. It helped to get it down.

Chapter 4

Jules and the Professor worked until nine o'clock. The old man had shown the young scholar various forms of Meso-American scripts. They had studied and discussed some of the many different symbolic forms of writing, so far discovered around the world. As the hour approached Jules began to signal his wish to stop. The old academic was not slow to pick up on this.

"You have had enough for tonight?" he asked.

"Yes, Professor." Jules pushed back his chair and closed the book he had been reading. "I promised Ed I'd meet him in the den around now." A quick glance to his watch.

"I see," the Professor eased himself back into his chair. "You do not want to let your friend down." It was said in an understanding tone. "You will come back tomorrow? Yes?"

"Of course, Professor."

"What time would that be?" as always, the Professor was keen to know when he would be knocking on his door.

"It will have to be in the afternoon sometime." Jules was a little vague. "I have to help my mother with the shopping in the morning."

"Yes, I see. Well, very well. About what time, exactly, do you think?" the Professor pushed.

"I tell you what. I'll email you when I'm about to leave my house." He smiled at his tutor. "That'll be alright, won't it?"

"Perfectly satisfactory, my boy," the old man's eyes glinted behind his glasses. "That will do fine." He put a friendly arm around the shoulder of his young hope. Together they headed for the door and the wide stairs down to ground level. On the way Jules determined to reveal a secret to the Professor.

"I'm in a bit of a rush, Professor." He paused to look at the old man. "I would like to use the back way into the woods." The Professor stared at him curiously.

"You mean to climb the trees over the wall?" he looked uncertain. "I believe you declared yourself a poor climber at our first meeting."

"Yes, that is true Professor." Jules agreed. "But I am afraid I was not honest with you at the time."

"Really, my boy?" the old man seemed mildly disappointed. "Tell me now."

They remained halfway down the stairs as Jules took them back to that night two years ago. Ed and Jules had been exploring the enclosed woods behind the walls. Sometimes the girls were with them. At the back of each of the girls' houses was a door, built into the wall. It led directly into the thickly wooded interior. A three-yard space was maintained and kept clear to halt the trees and general growth: this was hard against the wall. After this the apparently impenetrable flora ruled. Once the boys had seen the back doors of the girls' mansions, it got them wondering. What if there were any other hidden

entrances? They began to systematically search along all the walls. It was a very difficult job because of the thick growth. Sometimes they had to clamber and climb over the trees and the wall. But eventually they had scoured the entire range of the walls.

They had found three other entrances - they could not be called doors - they were each only a foot high off ground level. Ed had christened them 'ratholes'. They did seem only suitable for small animals to crawl under. Each one was just a very low gap at the foot of the wall. They had only been found when, using large sticks, the boys had lifted great bundles of brambles out of the way. The girls never tried but the boys managed to crawl under and then through the gap to the other side. One opening came out about twenty yards from the back wall of Jules' house. The other at a similar position on the opposite wall near to the rear of Ed's house.

But the third led into the back of the Lodge. Despite the doubts of the girls, the boys decided to explore and investigate one evening. They knew the old man lived in the house. But neither of their parents had any information about him. So, they thought it would be a laugh to spy on him and see what he was up to. It was also a bit of a dare for them. Ed insisted Jules led the way as he was the smallest. Jules had felt his friend was testing him, in front of the girls who were going to wait on the other side of the wall.

When the boys scrambled and crawled out from under the brambles, they quickly hid behind the big tree that dominated the Lodge's back garden. It was

just after sunset. The branches of the tree drooped low to the ground. No lights showed on the ground floor while upstairs a few rooms were lit. After a short while, to calm their nerves, the boys started to quietly explore. The back garden was the size of half a tennis court. It did not take them long, even being as stealthy as they could, to reconnoiter the entire space. There was nothing exceptional to be found. Much the same as their back gardens; merely bigger with the huge tree the focal point. They had even peered into the ground floor windows.

As they had tried to make out things the other side of the windows, a series of lights came on. They ran behind the tree trunk. Then, to their horror, the sound of the back door being unbolted rang through the dusk. Panic gripped them. They both realised that they would not make it back to the hole without being spotted. Ed started to climb the tree and in seconds he disappeared amongst the branches. The back door opened, and Jules could see the figure of the old man, backlit in the doorframe. He was carrying a big stick. To Jules, struck stiff in fear, it took on the proportions of a 'Little John' staff. Then the man switched on a torch in his other hand. The beam swept to the wall.

Suddenly jolted out of his inaction, Jules reached for the nearest branch. He heaved himself up. 'You have little upper body strength Jules!' a voice rang in his memory. He saw again the sight of himself slipping off the rope and the P.E. teacher shaking his head at him. As the torch beam moved past the tree trunk Jules had cleared the first few branches. He stopped climbing. He was

aware that his breathing was loud, he tried to take deep, quieter breaths. There was no sign of Ed above him. He listened.

The old man slowly walked around the back garden, skirting the wall and the tree. Occasionally he poked into bushes with his big stick. Jules carefully turned in the tree and followed his progress through gaps in the branches. Eventually the old man was in front of the windows. He examined them carefully with the torch. He turned to give one more sweep of the garden and he was about to turn for the door when a scraping sound, followed by a hastily muffled gasp came from above. He quickly turned the torch onto the tree before him. The beam raked the branches from top to bottom.

Jules fearing the beam would reveal him, squirmed, trying to squeeze even tighter to the trunk. But a foot slipped. He flapped the leg trying to find a grip, but it caused a loss of balance and his whole body twisted and dropped. One hand then came loose, the other failed to hold him and he fell. Ed said later that he was sure Jules had bounced off a few branches before he hit the ground. It was a heavy and loud landing. He rolled over gasping in pain and a little winded.

"Well! Well! What have we here?" the old man was on him. Jules was blinded by the light and felt the stick pinning him to the ground. He shielded his eyes with his hands.

"Are you not the young son of Mrs. Trull?" the old man lifted his stick.

"Yes, I am," Jules gasped a reply. The old man turned the torch off and reached down to help Jules onto his feet.

"Nothing broken?" the old man asked as he brushed twigs and leaves off him.

"No. Don't think so." Jules answered. But he rubbed his stomach and ribs painfully.

"You have some in your hair." The old man pointed out to the boy. Jules pulled bits from his hair.

"On your own?" the old man asked him.

"Yes." Jules replied too quickly. "Yes, I am." The old man gave him a shrewd look.

"You had better come inside," the old man led the way. "This adventure is over." He laughed warmly. "You could do with some tea I am sure." The old man ushered Jules into the house. He bolted the back door and disappeared from earshot.

Ed lowered himself from the tree. The lights were off again on the ground floor. He quickly made his way back under the brambles. The girls wore anxious looks as he got to his feet.

"What happened?" Rosie demanded.

"We heard voices." Collette offered.

"The old man's got Jules," Ed told them. Collette gasped and held her hand to her mouth.

"What do you mean, 'the old man's got Jules'?" Rosie's voice rose slightly in worry.

"Well he's taken him inside. He had a big stick. And a torch." Ed added.

"Did he say anything?" Rosie, her eyebrows raised in curiosity.

"Ah. Yeah." Ed paused. He started to clear the bits and pieces off his clothes and out of his hair.

"Yeah, what?" Collette this time.

"He said that ... ah ... that they were going to have ... have a ... ahh ... have a cup of tea." It did not sound very dangerous. The girls looked at each other. A 'boys' expression passed between them.

"We'd better go 'round the front and wait for him." Rosie announced.

"We'll go through my house." Ed led the way through the trees. The girls followed Ed through the gap under the wall. They passed through Ed's house. Ed's dad waved bleary eyed at them from the sofa. Soon they were outside the Lodge waiting for Jules to appear. At one point they saw him wave to them from the top floor window. They became less worried. Finally, half an hour after going in the back door, Jules emerged from the front door. He said a cheerful goodbye and thank you to the old man. His friends waited for him, now quite curious to know what had happened.

That was how it had all begun. But Jules had never revealed the presence of the scramble hole before. The Professor accompanied him into the back garden, where he held the brambles up for Jules as requested. He seemed very pleased

to know about this escape route, as he called it. As Jules got down on his belly the Professor asked him a last question.

"He is a good friend, Ed?"

"Yes, he is." A pause. "He's about my only real friend. But he is a great friend to have." Jules gave the Professor a questioning look. The Professor nodded at him.

"It is always good to have one, really good, true friend." Jules nodded back. Then he quickly crawled out of sight. The old man let the brambles fall back. He stepped back a few paces. You really could not see the bolt hole at all. He turned and went back inside with a very pleased look on his face. There were hidden ways in to the 'secret garden'.

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Ed lay flat on his back watching the darkening sky. One by one the stars appeared. There was very little breeze. The air was still warm from the heat of the day. There were things moving about around him. Small animals and birds, no doubt. He would have trouble hearing Jules approach. It would have been hard enough anyway. Jules could not climb trees well, but he was very light on his feet. He could creep and crawl several yards from you and you would not

know he was there. The girls found it spooky. He had often surprised them when they had started investigating this place. Disappearing one minute and then suddenly reappearing the next, making them jump in fright. Ed smiled at the memory.

Suddenly he heard the snap of some stem. He quickly turned to see Jules standing on the other side of the stream, grinning from ear to ear. Of course, he had deliberately snapped the fern under one of his trainers.

"How long you been there?" Ed scowled at him.

"Not long," Jules laughed. He crossed the stream using the steppingstones. They had placed them in the speedy flow over three years ago.

"How long?" Ed thought Jules could be a little creepy sometimes.

"No. I only just got here. I came through the Lodge hole." Jules sat down by his friend.

"Oh. Only if I thought you were standing there watching me like some bender. I'd not be very happy." Ed pointed out.

"Oh, really." Jules laughed at him. "You've got nothing to worry about. Big Boy!" he mockingly blew a kiss at Ed. "Now if you were ..."

"Collette or Rosie." Ed interrupted.

"No!"

"Or, that sixth form girl. You know the one that fancies me." Ed was teasing.

"No!" Jules kept his cool.

"Who then? Who did you have in mind for a secret, what do you call it? Tryst?" Ed was staring at him, a slight sneer on his face.

"I don't know." For some reason Jules could think of no one, except the girls. He frowned deeply.

"Forget it, Jules. You got no chance." Ed lay on his back again. No chance with what? Or who? Jules wondered. They said nothing for a minute. Jules watched the dark water, listening to it slip past.

"I think I saw the space station." Ed said. Jules thought for a couple of seconds.

"Yeah. That could be." Jules lay on his back too.

"Sweet." Ed said aloud.

Jules became lost in memories. He remembered the day he and Ed had first forced their way into the enclosed wood. They had been exploring along the outside of the wall between his house and Rosie's. Eventually they had clambered across overhanging branches and dropped into this secret place. In the months after their first incursion they had persuaded the girls to join them. Together they had followed the stream from wall to wall. Together they had made paths of a kind by thrashing down the undergrowth with big sticks. The machete that Ed's dad gave them was a great help too. Although Ed would not let anyone else use it. In turn they had all been scratched, stung and bitten by various plants and insects.

They had found this open patch of ground early on in their explorations. For some reason the trees and the brambles did not intrude here. A space, no bigger than a squash court, was left open to the sky. Only long soft grass grew here. Tall ferns marked the edges, guarding in some unknown way against all other encroachment. The stream, alone, trespassed on the tranquility of their den. They regularly flattened the grass. The best way to do this was to lie on the ground and roll over it, flattening the grass as they spun around.

They had established another den; a kind of back-up den. It was close to Rosie's back door, whereas the main den was, just about, in the middle of the enclosure. They often met here in the evenings. They gossiped about people at school. Moaned about their parents; the girls more than the boys. Talked about who they fancied; Jules talked the least. He remembered the shock they shared on 9/11. Would they still meet here as they got older? Jules wondered. Already the girls came less frequently.

"Hey!" Ed was shouting at him. "Wake up dream boy!" Jules leaned to face Ed.

"What do you want?" there was a trace of irritation in his voice.

"I said, 'how is the Professor?'" Ed asked again.

"I think he's alright." Jules did not sound convincing. "He seemed a bit edgy. Kept looking out the window onto the road."

"Anything out there?" Ed was interested.

"Nothing really, just a beat-up car pulled up on the tip. Druggies I expect."

Ed gave a grunt of disgust.

"How did you do in the test?" Ed asked.

"No problems." Ed could tell Jules was pleased.

"So, what are you two killer bookworms working on next?" Ed still sounded interested.

"The Professor wants me to become familiar with all the writings and symbols of the Americans. You know: the Incas, Aztecs, Mayas, Olmecs, Toltecs, Pueblos, Anasazi..."

"Alright! Alright! I get the picture." Ed smiled at Jules.

"You know he's got an actual document written only a few years after the conquest of the Incas." Jules seemed in awe.

"Yeah?" Ed was not sure what this meant.

"It was written by one of the Priests." Jules sucked on his teeth. "The Professor said he had got it from the Madrid museum. Must be worth a fortune."

"Really?" Ed raised himself onto his elbows. "How much?"

"Hundreds, I'd say." Jules was guessing.

"Hundreds of pounds isn't much Jules." Ed mocked him lightly.

"Hundreds of thousands I mean." Ed was wide eyed. "Might even be a million." Ed whistled.

"Wow, Jules!" Ed was impressed. "Does he have much stuff like that?"

"He's got loads of stuff like that: manuscripts and so on from Berlin, Paris, Rome, Athens, Cairo, New York ..."

"Yeah. Alright already!" Ed put on an American accent. They were quiet for a while.

"Perhaps the Professor should be a bit concerned when a car pulls up near his house and stays there." Ed thought aloud.

"I think you're right." Jules had had another, for the first time, realisation. A frown had settled on his brow.

About 11 o'clock the chill had descended, they went home. They had brought torches with them. Nevertheless, Jules heard the cursing of Ed as he tripped up twice before he reached the hole near his house. Jules also fell and muddied his hands as he broke his fall. But he did not cry out. An Owl followed him all the way to his back wall. The first time it had happened he had been spooked by it. But now he realised that as he blundered around, he disturbed the small creatures. They broke cover and the Owl tried to prey on them.

Jules scrambled over the garden wall and tried the back door. It was locked. He knocked very loudly. Soon his mother opened it and let him in. She had been asleep in front of the TV, he could tell. She ordered him to have a shower before he went to bed, sending him on his way with a peck on his cheek.

Chapter 5

It was three in the afternoon when Jules eventually made his way to the Lodge entrance. He could see that the beat-up car was in position, inside the tip. The Professor welcomed him warmly, as usual.

"Has it been there all the time?" Jules pointed over his shoulder as he stepped across the threshold.

"No." The Professor tried to smile unconcernedly at Jules. But the boy saw the swift frown that crossed the Professor's face. "They left at midnight and came back at noon." Jules followed the old scholar up to the third floor. Together they stood at the window and gazed at the partially hidden car amongst the wrecks.

"I found these this morning." The Professor produced a small pair of binoculars from one of his cardigan pockets. He handed them to Jules. But they did little to help. Jules could now see clearly that the windows of the car were blacked-out.

"None the wiser, are we?" the Professor sighed softly. He walked towards the huge table.

"Who do you think they are?" Jules followed behind. "Do you think they are relic hunters?"

"Could be." The Professor sat down. "Could be worse." Jules inclined his head in enquiry. But the Professor would not elaborate.

"Before we start today, Jules, I must say, before I forget, again." The old academic seemed exasperated with himself. "We are performing such wonders here, every day, but we do not work, in great enough detail, on oriental areas of research. It is a weakness of mine. I have never immersed myself thoroughly enough in those areas. You must not neglect them. You must be more accomplished than me. More learned. Wiser and stronger. You must have a wider and deeper knowledge. You must cram that brain," he playfully tapped Jules' head, "with more than I have managed in my lifetime. I will not always be here." A pause while he looked at Jules strangely. "If only I had found you twenty years ago, my boy. We could have done wonders together. But now it will be up to you, when I have gone, to carry on the work. You must be the new fount of knowledge for the Order." Then he gave Jules a vast list of names and references for him to check out on the internet. He told him the names of the finest oriental linguists and told him he must study with them in the future.

What all this meant Jules did not have a clue. He did not like the sound of some of it. He enjoyed working with the Professor. He loved learning all these wonderful languages and writings, along with the history, the myths, the symbols; symbolism fascinated him. He realised, the previous evening, that he was rather fond of the old man and he did not like the sound of him being 'gone'. He was old. Very old. But he seemed healthy enough to Jules' eyes. Did he know something and was not letting on? What was this about 'the Order'? Anyway, Jules could not see himself doing this kind of thing all his

life. He had G.C.S.E.s next year. Then he would have to choose his 'A levels'. He was so good at most subjects; it was going to be difficult to make a choice. Already some teachers were talking to him about doing their subject. There was going to be pressure. Stress.

Although Jules relentlessly interrogated the Professor, all weekend, trying to find out what the Professor was alluding to. He received no concrete information from him. However, he did get more cryptic utterances and unknown references. The Professor frequently erupted into barely audible monologues. Especially when he checked for the presence of the car in the tip and found it still there. Or it had reappeared after a welcome absence of a few hours. Jules was becoming a little concerned for the old man. He seemed to be particularly tired at this moment.

But he was also drawn into their work more. The Professor had cleared a large space on the table. He had put the displaced books and papers in careful piles on the floor. During the rest of the weekend this space became filled with other documents, books and papers. The Professor began to tell Jules a little of his background. He also told him more about the estate that had been wiped off the face of the Earth, apparently.

The Professor had been born into a well-to-do family. "Very different to you, my boy." Jules did not take offence. He noted that the Professor failed to realise, as often was the case, that he might have said something upsetting to him. The Professor had been sent to all the right schools: prep. school, public

school and Oxbridge. He had gained various degrees from both Cambridge and Oxford. Then he had spent many years engaged in a mixture of linguistic and archaeological research. This was the period when he had travelled the world and worked in many of the most renowned universities.

But he had been called back to his homeland. He did not say who or what had brought him back. Jules thought it was clear that this 'Order' was behind it. They became a constant backdrop to the Professor's story. He had taken up residence here in the Lodge; it was owned by the 'Order'. It was now revealed to Jules how the 'Order' had been founded by a member of the same family who had once owned the vast estate. It was formed as a means of paying penance for the past. Jules was disappointed that this 'Order' was not hundreds, or even thousands of years old.

The Professor explained that the family had always been adventurers and explorers. Since the time of the Crusades they had travelled the world, looting. Everywhere they went they stole local treasures. They coveted and obtained important cultural artifacts. Their methods were usually dubious at best. Nefarious at worst. Subterfuge, poison, rebellion, raids, outright war, marriage, theft, blackmail, assassination, kidnap, these were just some of their means to an end. Every campaign led by the Kings and Queens of England since the Crusades, every action that enlarged the British Empire, they were part of. From every corner of the world a great wealth was amassed. It was a treasure rich in gold, silver, jewels of all kinds. But aside from these obvious sources of

wealth and power. They also collected many relics and objects of historical and cultural importance: talismans; figures; scripts; documents; books; maps; writings of crucial people in history. They robbed lands of their records: their legends; their history; their future even.

But finally, a key family member had a change of heart. Returning from southern Mesopotamia he shocked the other family members by insisting on ending their villainous ways. There was internal strife and a family feud began which persisted to this day. But he was successful. The unwilling family members, along with much of the treasure, broke away. They had since become thoroughly embedded in almost every western society. Usually high in the ruling class, or in the Military and Aristocracy. The Professor warned him that they had an influence that was pervading and pernicious. Money ruled in the world: it brought influence and power.

Attempting to wipe the stains of the past away, the vast estate was stripped bare and sold off. The buildings were razed to the ground. Only the Lodge remained intact. Many of the real treasures: the art; the sculpture; the writings, the tablets; the glyphs; the historical heart and soul of great and dead civilisations were returned to where they belonged. This was not always possible. Lands were often at war. Governments were unstable or worse, unsuitable. Important objects still lay hidden, protected by members of the 'Order', they were secreted around the world under watchful and friendly eyes.

The Professor had joined the 'Order' at a time when its secrecy had led to a paralysis. A collapse had occurred in the connections between members. Knowledge of each other and their whereabouts was fragmented. Important objects were being lost, or worse, taken by the descendants of the breakaway group. Rich and unscrupulous collectors were creating havoc. The Professor by his own admission had rescued the situation. He had gathered all the written records and archives that were available; they were mainly here in the Lodge. He had resurrected the networks and got the 'Order' breathing again. It had become active once more and, also, was now engaged in the other aims of its founder: to prevent the corruption and loss of new finds; to pursue the recovery of lost relics; to assist in honourable and legitimate archaeology.

But the Professor did not tell Jules the name of this virtuous 'Order'. He said he was not directly related to the original family. His role was to coordinate research, link members and spread information. He also had to preserve knowledge for the future. Hence his teachings. Hence his interest in Jules. At this point Jules became uncomfortable once more. He did not share the Professor's vision of his future place in this 'Order'. It sounded outdated. It seemed to be something out of a fantasy tale. A Victorian adventure or an 'Indiana Jones' escapism for men who had not quite grown up. He failed to see the point of it all in these times. What was the danger? What great harm was it preventing? It was college old boys living out some 'ripping yarns'.

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On Saturday night Jules had a vivid dream. He had turned into a 'Terminator' who was ridding the world of people who burnt books. He had a magic pen and a very shiny sword. Whatever the pen wrote would appear. The sword worked in an opposite way to normal. If he swung it at a ripped-up book, it made it whole again. There was a secret library where a copy of everything ever written was kept. There were stone sections, a skin section etc. etc. But he had lost the library, he could not find it. He was looking for it. Then Collette's mum pulled up in the off roader. She wanted him to get inside. Rosie was inside, and she beckoned him. She was wearing her netball kit and was sweating heavily. Then Ed was running up to him, shouting. The off roader had gone. Ed hit him with a huge book. As it slammed into his face, he could make out the word, 'Order'. He woke with a jump.

On Sunday Jules realised that the papers he and the Professor were studying were all related to the activities of 'the Order'. They documented many examples of returned artifacts and the impact this had had on the peoples and countries. He began to see some point in this 'Order' when he read the letters of thanks and saw the faces of happy proud people. Around the world people were reclaiming their heritage.

It was during the afternoon when Jules' mobile rang. It was Ed. Jules welcomed the break. Ed had a new game. He had bought it with his dad yesterday. They had both been playing it ever since by the sound of it. Ed was good at games. There were other kids better than him in school. But what really vexed Ed was that his dad was often equally as good as him. Jules was convinced that Ed's dad helped buy the games so that he could play them himself, especially when Ed was in school. There was a real rivalry between father and son when it came to playing games. Ed told Jules about every tournament he and his dad had fought out already. Jules grinned at his friend's excitement.

Ed used his mobile to show Jules the game. It looked good.

"That's smart, that!" Jules said approvingly. He was not a games player. He did not have the time.

"Hello, Mr. Toper." Ed's dad had come into view.

"Hi, Jules." Ed's dad waved. "I'm hammering him, Jules!" he smiled.

"Are not!" Ed disagreed. Jules laughed. Mr. Toper was making gestures behind his son's back.

"What are you doing Dad?" Ed turned around sharply.

"Nothing son, nothing." Mr. Toper answered in a mildly irritating tone. He winked at Jules and walked out of picture. Jules was still laughing.

"How's it going Jules." Ed asked him. "Busy, are you?"

"Yeah. It's getting a bit heavy to be honest." He glanced around. The Professor was standing by the window, a hand stroking his chin. He had not heard him. Jules then quietly told Ed a little about what he was doing. They talked about general things for a while. Jules was about to sign off when he heard the Professor say to himself, "if I could just see who they are." Jules had an idea. He asked Ed to carry it out for him.

Jules joined the Professor at the window.

"How is Ed?" the Professor enquired automatically.

"He's fine. Got a new toy to play with."

"I did not think children today played with toys anymore." The Professor sighed. "You all seem to have those things permanently held to your ears."

"Yeah, well they do have their uses, you know." Jules sounded conspiratorial. The Professor gave him a quizzical look.

"Wait and watch," was all Jules would say for now. Nothing happened for five minutes. The Professor kept shooting expectant glances at Jules, who refused to return them, he just smiled, slyly. Then they both saw Ed walking on the other side of the road. He was heading straight for the burnt-out wrecks. Jules waited. Then as Ed was about twenty yards from the beat-up car Jules rang him.

Ed answered his phone, "right, see me?"

"Of course." Jules replied. "Get closer."

"OK!" Ed advanced, he held his mobile out in front of him.

"Keep talking." Jules told him. He held his mobile so that he and the Professor could see the picture from Ed's.

"What about?" Ed was holding back a giggle. Jules could tell.

"Tell us what you can see." Jules suggested. The Professor had smiled when he realised what they were doing. Now he showed concern. "Tell Ed to be careful. He must be ready to run for it."

"Copy that!" Ed said. "This is a bit of a laugh." The Professor frowned.

"Just be careful, 'James Bond!'" Jules told him. Ed giggled out loud.

"OK, Miss Money Penny." It sounded uncannily like 'Sean Connery'. To Jules' surprise the Professor laughed softly.

"Well as you can see it is a battered looking black car." Ed had begun his commentary. "I do believe it is a Merc. Yes, it is. Very dirty. Not actually that battered now I'm closer to it." He was about ten feet away now.

"Do not get too close Ed!" the Professor, a little urgently.

"Go around it. Stay that distance away." Jules instructed him.

"Roger, control." Ed barked at them. They could see nothing through the darkened windows. There was no way of telling how many people were in the car.

"Engine not running. Fresh fags by the front door, passenger side. Urgghh! Used condoms on the floor here. Just dodging them." He made his way around the back of the car. "Hard to make out the number plate, isn't it?" but Jules and the Professor did not answer him. As Ed came level with the driver's seat, the

mobile rocked in his hand. "Hi! Hi!" He called out. They could see that the front passenger's door was opening.

"Got company!" Ed told them.

"We can see." They could see that it was a woman. She was standing with her back to Jules and the Professor. She was about average height. Black hair came down to her shoulders. She wore a black jump suit. Ed had focused the mobile on her. She took her sunglasses off. The Professor went rigid next to Jules.

"It's a woman," Ed was saying, obviously. "She's a bit of a looker." The mobile view panned down to her bosom. The zip of her jump suit had been pulled down, revealing an impressive sight. "Get a look at that, Jules!" Ed's voice was more a whisper now.

"What are you doing?" the woman spoke calmly. She leant against the car roof. The view had disappeared. The Professor leaned forward as if to get a better view. The sound of her voice had caused him to clench his fist.

"Let's see her face." Jules ordered Ed.

"How's that?" Ed offered. "Any better?"

"Yes." But Jules was watching the Professor's reaction. His nails were digging into his hand. His eyes, fixed on the image of the woman, were suddenly cold.

"Get away Ed. Now!" he commanded.

"What are you doing?" the woman repeated. "Who are you talking to?"

"Leaving the lovely lady now." Ed closed the mobile and backed off towards the road. The driver's door opened, and a large man emerged. He was bigger than Ed. It was time to leave.

"Run Ed!" Jules shouted into his mobile. It was pointless. Ed had switched his off and was already running. He shot off across the road heading in a straight line for his house. For an instant the large man, who also wore a jump suit, made to chase after him. But a command from the woman stopped him in his tracks. He got back into the car. The woman looked to where Jules and the Professor were watching. She saw them. She watched them for a few seconds then she got back into the car. Immediately the car pulled onto the road and it went in the direction of Jules' house.

Jules watched the Professor relax a little. He became less stiff.

"Someone you know?"

The Professor nodded.

"Friend or foe?"

"Foe." The Professor answered. "A very dangerous foe." He walked back to the table and sat down. "This calls for a change of plan I think." He steepled his fingers in his hands and said nothing for many minutes. While he pondered his course of action Ed rang Jules again.

"How was that?" he did not bother to show himself.

"It did the trick." Jules answered him. He had gone to the other window and was staring towards the wood. "But it's upset the Professor."

"Really!" Ed sounded concerned. "He knows her."

"Oh yeah. She's an enemy by the look of it."

"An enemy?! What do you mean?"

"I'll have to tell you tomorrow. It's a long story."

"Righto! See you tomorrow." Ed rang off.

"I'm going to go home, Professor." He called over to him. "Is that alright?"

The Professor looked at him, his eyes seemed out of focus briefly.

"Yes, certainly, my boy." He got up. "I have a lot to think about." He stared at Jules weighing the boy up once more in his mind.

"I need you to come every night this week." Before Jules could reply. "Can you do that? It is of the utmost importance!" for the first time Jules detected a pleading tone in his voice. His eyes were keenly watching him.

"Of course, I can." Jules never thought about it.

"From now on you must come and go using the bolt hole. Is that understood?" Jules nodded vigorously.

"I do not think you will be in danger during the day. Going to school and back." He paused. "Do keep your friends with you at all times." Jules nodded again. But less enthusiastically this time.

"No, if they are going to try anything it will be at night, on your way to and from the Lodge." He led the way down the stairs and into the back garden.

"We need to be careful." Jules was quite happy to do this if it made the Professor happy. He did think it was all a bit over the top really. Perhaps the

old man was over reacting. He knew one thing for sure, his mum would not be happy at the mess his clothes were going to be in every night.

Chapter 6

The last week in school before the Summer holidays was full of incident for the four friends. On Monday Jules told Ed what he had learnt from the Professor over the weekend. It took some time to cover all the details. Most of it done with whispers during lessons, then finished off in a noisy canteen at break time. Rosie and Collette listened to some of the tale. Otherwise their minds were on more important matters. Ed infuriated Jules because although he appeared to be listening, it was obvious that from time to time his concentration wavered. Jules found himself repeating things.

Ed listened but took little notice of the news. He was not interested in much of it. Especially all that 'secret document stuff' as he christened it. However, he was more attentive when Jules talked about the treasure parts. He managed to convince himself that treasure lay hidden in the Lodge, that the Professor was sitting on a fortune. He urged Jules to find out more. There had to be secret chambers and hidden passages, that, no doubt, led to ancient bounty. There would be special taps and secret levers that would gain them entry. The old man liked Jules so much he would probably let him walk off with a solid gold thing, he joked.

Unfortunately for Jules Ed did not come back to school for the rest of the week. Some kids and some teachers thought Ed and his dad had gone on a holiday. Suddenly decided, or maybe planned, taking advantage of cheaper

rates before the schools broke up. But a stream of at first unanswered texts from Jules to Ed revealed the truth, eventually. Ed and his dad were engaged in a titanic struggle. They had decided to play each other, virtually non-stop, at almost every game Ed had. The girls were only mildly shocked when they found out; they thought Ed's dad was a bit of a 'weirdo'; their parents thought he was a very dubious character. Besides they had other things to worry about.

For Jules it was a disaster. Once the bullies realised that Ed was unlikely to be back this year, they tried harder to catch Jules. Generally, Jules was safe during lessons. It was breaks and in the corridors that he was vulnerable: in the first two days he had been crushed in the middle of four boys; he had been carried by a 'flow' halfway along a corridor and then dumped on the floor; some sly kicking had followed that. But worst of all was the ambush in the toilets. He emerged, finally, with splash marks in embarrassing places. The waiting crowd lapped it up and the ridicule stayed with him all week.

The girls were some help, if he could only reach them and stay with them. Why do girls go to the toilets so often? And together? Just when he thought he had escaped the pushing and shoving they would disappear into the toilets. Then Jules was left to look anxiously around for any threats. Collette was particularly effective at guarding him. She easily saw off the bullies. They were in awe of her: mostly for one reason. But the girls were concentrating on other matters and were not keen to have him hanging around them all the time. Eventually Jules took the ultimate refuge with Mr. Stranger. He could stay in

Stranger's lab. in safety. There were others there, drawn from all year groups and not all because of the bullies. Usually Stranger let them play games and he helped pupils with their work. But there was not much of that going on at the end of year. Jules joined other kids who were helping the teacher have an end of year clear-out.

Triumph came to the girls on the last day, Friday. Rosie had been practising hard, all year in truth, but particularly recently. She was proclaimed the best dancer in the school that year. She performed in the last school assembly. Jules noticed the rapt attention of many of the boys; the girls were more critical. Collette had run in the Nationals that week. Surprisingly she came second in one race, however, she won three others and helped the county relay team to third place. Jules imagined what her face would have looked like at these minor setbacks. Collette was easily the best sportsperson of the year and she glowed as she went up to receive her award in the assembly. Unlike Rosie she drew an enthusiastic reaction from boys and girls. Although of course some sections of the kids were not interested or impressed by any achievements of this kind. Some of them had managed to get a smoke beforehand; they were stoned and giggled throughout.

Afterwards the girls enjoyed the appreciation of their girlfriends. There was lots of hugging. Older boys were 'sniffing' about them. Jules was left to run as fast as he could - to his delight and his deep relief, he escaped the chasing gang. Reaching the lane, he explained where the girls were to Collete's mum. He did

not wait. He had dreamt more strange scenes in which the older woman had appeared and feeling awkward for some reason he continued. Basically, he had run all the way home.

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The evenings had been much better. He had explained to his mother what he was doing. She did not fully understand but made sure his older, more worn clothes were available every evening. Jules enjoyed the scrambling under the walls and the shared subterfuge with the Professor. The car and the woman had not returned, and the old academic was more himself at the continued absence.

He explained that the high walls had been built soon after the dismantling and complete removal of the estate buildings. It was intended to enclose the area that the big house had once covered. Gradually the lands either side were sold and passed through many hands. Slowly the city boundaries crept closer and closer. At some point the terraced housing was built. There had originally been many rows of the housing, but now just the two ruined rows were left. Of course, only two houses remained habitable. In the meantime, the other terraces had been pulled down to make way for the tower blocks. Thankfully not all the

intended tower blocks had been constructed, otherwise they would be living in their shadows. The Professor hinted that 'the Order' had arranged it.

The land enclosed by the walls and now completely overrun by the wood intrigued Jules. He worked on the Professor until he gave him the information. The land enclosed and the walls themselves were in fact the property of the Crown. Soon after the conflict arose between the family factions it was placed under the direct ownership of the Monarchy. It formed part of a 'portfolio' of assets which never appeared in any lists - very few people were aware of this. Only a few high ranking 'Order' members and alas, the Professor confided, some of their enemies too. There had been attempts to buy the land over the years. A few housing schemes and road reviews had tried to purchase the land. In the late 1800's the two country mansion houses had been permitted. Half a century ago the bungalows and the rest of the exclusive estate had been added. All other attempts failed almost before they gathered any momentum. In most cases the potential new owners, including councils, never knew why or how they had failed. Their lawyers merely informed them that the project was impossible. The Professor hinted, again, that other options were often provided to the enquiring parties and interest always wavered, then evaporated.

Why had the wood been encouraged?

Why was the land so important?

Were things buried and still hidden inside?

It was obvious that the Lodge was crucial. The Professor told him that the Lodge had been continuously occupied since the walls had been built. There had always been members of the 'Order' resident here. Usually the keepers of the records and other papers, etc. At various times during the first few evenings Jules had caught the old man sneaking looks at him. He seemed to be continually appraising Jules. The Professor was wondering whether he was doing the right thing. Wondering if his prodigy was ready. Whether he could cope. Jules felt his doubts. Also, there were the 'what would you do if you were in this position?' questions. A type of 'moral dilemma' situation game. Jules was not good at handling hypothetical questions and situations. It had to mean something to him and to be real. He was poor at this sort of thing in school, also. The Professor was disappointed in his attitude and response to these exercises.

At one point on Wednesday evening Jules was being particularly evasive in his answers. He was also trying to find out more about the significance of what lay inside the high walls. The Professor gave Jules another doubtful look. But then he seemed to make his mind up.

"Very well the time has come to show you more." The Professor went to the grand fireplace. He impatiently waved Jules over to him. Jules stood shiny eyed beside the old man, they were similar heights, however, Jules was standing fully upright whereas the Professor bore the stoop of old age.

"Somewhere in this old fireplace is a hidden compartment. Can you find it?" he then sat down again and began to watch Jules closely. Initially Jules' heart had leapt with excitement. But after five minutes in which he had pushed, prodded and tapped every part of the fireplace, he was feeling some frustration. The expression on the Professor's face was unflinching; he was giving nothing away.

Jules began to pay more attention to the markings on the grate. They were many and varied. There were letters and symbols from many ancient scripts, but he could discern no pattern and some of the symbols he failed to recognise. He needed more information. Turning to the Professor he asked, "you have still not told me the name of your precious 'Order', Professor?" he failed to hide a trace of scorn in his voice. But the question had produced a flicker of a smile from the old academic.

"We are called 'The Order of Gilgamesh'!" he proclaimed proudly. His face became inscrutable once more. 'The Epic of Gilgamesh' had been the first book the Professor had lent him; no coincidence it now seemed. A blizzard of names and places came to Jules' mind. He scanned the images on the bricks again, carefully. There was nothing that reminded him of the Sumerian legend, the great king of Uruk, one of the first city states, ever, probably. Jules pressed and twisted, again, a few of the symbols he did not recognise. He thought about the letter 'G'. He focused his effort on trying to see if 'G' in its various forms was

present amongst the letters and symbols. He examined everyone he found, but the grate did not react in any way.

Something from an 'Indiana Jones' film came to him. What was the Greek for 'G'? It was gamma. He tried all the gammas, nothing. 'G' is the seventh letter in our alphabet he thought. But none of the symbols linked to seven worked. But then gamma was the third Greek letter, so, he tried anything to do with the number three, nothing. He sighed heavily to himself. A quick glance at the Professor found him staring with the same intensity. Jules thought some more about the great King 'Gilgamesh'.

He was borne of a God and Goddess. He judged the dead. He went on a great journey. 'Enkidu' the wild man was his big friend. Was he the first King of Uruk? Something had caught his eye. A line of small crowns spread from one side to the other. They were divided into a pattern. They were split up into a series of blocks. In each block the number of crowns increased by one. So, they went: one crown; two crowns; three crowns; so on. Jules remembered that 'Gilgamesh was the fifth King.

He moved in front of the block of five crowns. He examined it very closely, scanning along the panel both ways. He did not look at the Professor, but he could sense the tension in him. Was it as simple as that? He asked himself and then he tapped five times on the block. Immediately, below him, a stone drawer popped out. The drawer was inside the arch of the fireplace. If a fire had been lit, then it would have been very difficult to reach it.

"Excellent! Excellent! Well done my boy!" the Professor was on his feet. He clapped his hands. Jules was feeling very pleased with himself. Wait till he told Ed about this; he would have to be impressed!

"Only one other person has been successful. But she took longer, much longer."

"Look inside, Jules." The Professor told him. Jules pulled the drawer open further and bent down to see what was there. He immediately recoiled, and the look of triumph had disappeared from his face. He stepped back from the grate. The Professor said nothing. He came to the grate and pulled the contents out of the drawer. In his hand was a revolver and a parchment. The revolver looked in pristine condition to Jules. With a movement the Professor showed that it was loaded. He cocked and un-cocked the handgun. Jules had no doubt that he was very familiar with the weapon. It stunned him.

"We do not need this now," the Professor said and returned the gun to the drawer. He walked to the table and spread the parchment out.

"This is a plan of the old estate." He told Jules. "Study it closely and memorise it." He left Jules to his task.

The Professor returned with a tray of tea and dodgy looking biscuits. They settled into their chairs.

"Conclusions?" the Professor suddenly asked.

"Well," Jules was not sure, "I'd say that they left behind what looks like a kind of subterranean chamber." The old man nodded slightly. "Or perhaps a sort of super-sized cellar."

"That's correct."

"It looks to me that it lies, more or less, underneath where our den is." Jules wondered if this had something to do with the lack of trees there.

"I would say exactly underneath," the Professor qualified his statement.

"What's in it?" it was the obvious question and had to be asked. The Professor peered at Jules over his teacup.

"We believe some of the greatest treasures and stolen works are stored there." He paused. "But we do not know how to get in. Or even where the proper entrance is." Yes, there was no clear marked way in, Jules thought.

"Why don't you just break your way in?" Jules asked bluntly. "You know get a bulldozer, or JCB and smash your way in."

"No. We cannot. One thing we do know, if any attempt is made to force a way in then the entire contents will be destroyed." He sighed. "It has to be done in the correct manner."

"And that is what you are mainly working on?" Jules knew the answer. He continued, "and how near a solution are you?" the Professor's eyes gleamed at Jules.

"I am very near, very near." But his voice was worried. "The problem is, someone else seems to be aware of this too."

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Thursday evening there was a knock on the door. The bell was rung also. Each time there was a rhythm to each series of sounds. The two scholars: teacher and pupil, froze. The Professor made no move. They waited. The knocking was repeated several times. The Professor crept to the window facing onto the road. Jules followed. They could see a figure at the entrance. Bizarrely the figure held an umbrella over their head. Then Jules realised that it must be a parasol.

"It is her," the Professor spoke quietly. "See, the car has returned." He pointed across the road to the tip. They did not respond to the persistent knocking. Then the figure stepped back and lowered the parasol. Jules looked down into the face of the woman. She was touching her ear, he realised that she was radio linked to the large man in the car.

She smiled up at them. Jules felt the Professor shudder, but he said nothing and continued to stare down at her. Jules could now see that what he had thought was a strand of hair across her face, viewed closer, was a long thin scar. It ran from above one eye across her cheek to the edge of her chin. She seemed to have black eyes, thin black eyebrows, sharp high cheekbones and full lips. A

dimple formed in her chin. Jules could not tell how old she was. She reminded him of some actress or other: he expected Ed would know.

"Smart scar. She's pretty." Jules finally said aloud.

"Pretty dangerous," the Professor muttered. Jules turned to smile at him.

"You made a joke, Professor."

"What boy?" the Professor was confused. Then he understood. "See that scar. I knew the man who gave her that." Jules stared at him. "She killed him." Jules shuddered. They stared at the woman who was examining the front door. Eventually she crossed the road and got back into the car. Only then did the Professor come away from the window.

"I think it's time to try plan B," Jules pulled out his mobile.

"What have you got in mind?" the old man seemed doubtful.

"You'll see," Jules grinned grimly. But he was taken aback to find Ed's dad answering his call.

"Ah! Ed said you'd be ringing, Jules," Mr. Toper was quite jolly at the other end. "He's just gone out. Left his mobile here on purpose. Said to tell you 'he's on it'."

"Oh! OK, Mr. Toper. Thank you."

It did take a time. Ed had returned to his house and rang Jules back to tell him he had done his best. Jules had explained the plan to the Professor, who was very sceptical.

"Ed has gone to the tower blocks and the pub," he was repeating what Jules had told him. "He has spread the rumour that there is an unmarked 'cop car' hiding at the tip. Or it might be other drug dealers from a different 'turf'. Either way this should make the undesirables come and investigate."

"Yes."

"But if it's the Police will they not want to leave them alone?"

"No, Professor. These people enjoy taunting the cops. They don't need much excuse to play up. We might get the first serious disturbance of the Summer."

"But will they not expect more Police to come?"

"Oh, yeah." The Professor frowned.

"What will they do otherwise?"

"Well, those two in the car will have to do some explaining. I hope they've got a good story."

"The people in the car will not be afraid to use violence."

"I hope so." Jules seemed gleeful.

"But they have guns and might use them."

"Professor, the gangs and dealers in the tower blocks have guns too." Jules secretly hoped there would be a lot of heavy violence. Not because he wanted to see it particularly, but because it did not matter to him if the people in the car, or the scum from the blocks were hurt. Or indeed killed!

Around ten they spotted two lads having a look at the situation. At half past a crowd of about twenty people arrived: men and women, all colours, the Professor noted. Jules could see the gang leaders at the back. Ed had pointed them out to him once. It did not seem like the couple in the car saw them coming. The crowd swarmed around the car. They rocked it. They banged on the doors and roof. Some ran over the car. Others started to smash bottles on the car. Bricks were thrown. However, the car seemed to be able to take the knocks.

"Probably armour-plated," the Professor explained. Jules frowned at him.

"Why?"

"Stop bullets I expect." Jules shook his head in disbelief. But a development was happening - the woman and the large man had got out of the car. The crowd backed off, screaming at them. Jules could imagine what they were shouting:

"Who the f***** hell are you?"

"You f***** filth? Are you? F*** off!"

"You f***** slag, f*** off our end. F*** off back where you f***** come from."

"Do you f***** want it?" Do you? F***** bastards!"

Jules gave the Professor a commentary. They could not hear from where they were. The Professor looked very disapprovingly at him. Outside the woman was attempting to talk to the rabble, but communications very quickly

turned to their most basic form. Some of the crowd, women as well as men, rushed into attack. Jules gasped at the ease with which the woman and the large man defended themselves, and three or four people were soon laid out on each side of the car. The crowd screamed in anger.

"They are almost all high on drugs and drink." Jules informed the Professor.

"No doubt." The Professor was still concerned. Then the sound of gunshots rent the night. The crowd screamed and dived for cover. The woman and large man instantly produced guns of their own and they returned fire. Then more shots were fired at them. Again, they fired back, but now were getting back into the car, the doors closed, and the engine was started. The car tore off the wasteland and accelerated down the road past Jules' house.

There was some cheering from the tip, then some very loud screaming and wailing burst out. A few minutes later Jules and the Professor heard approaching sirens coming their way.

"It would appear the night is not over yet." The Professor remarked.

Chapter 7

By the time the first Police car arrived most of the mob had disappeared in the direction of the tower blocks. But the injured had stayed. They were accompanied by a few others: family, or friends, Jules and the Professor supposed. When the ambulances arrived, there were three marked Police cars present. Jules and the Professor were now standing in the Lodge entrance watching the spectacle. Ed's dad had come down the road to see what was going on and he now stood about twenty yards from them on their side of the road. He had waved at them but said nothing. Jules mouthed at him, 'where's Ed?' but Mr. Toper merely indicated behind him.

The injured and their supporters were giving the cops a hard time. They were screaming and swearing at them, moaning about being attacked and not being safe on the streets, loudly proclaiming their rights to everything, it seemed to Jules. These were the same people who had come with clubs, knives and guns to 'sort out' any opposition; Jules thought, how ironic. The Police tried to get statements from them. Then when the ambulance crews were ready to take the injured to hospital, they all insisted on going along. At this point the patience of the Police snapped. They had been reinforced by plain clothed detectives. and only a few were allowed in the ambulances.

As the ambulances pulled away, escorted by one marked car, the incident vehicles began to arrive. The area of the tip where the shooting had occurred

was being cordoned off. More crime scene investigation vehicles and people were arriving. One officer had briefly spoken to them earlier and told them to wait. Now they saw a detective come from a group examining the ground where the car had left its tyre tracks.

"I am Detective Robin," the officer introduced himself with a slight smile.

"Now, Sir, if I could just ask you a few questions?" he was in his late twenties, maybe early thirties, Jules thought. He had a small notepad in one of his hands.

"Certainly." The Professor replied. But before the first question was delivered a familiar voice came from the side.

"Julian!" they all turned to see Jules' mother arrive on the scene. "Julian, Professor, what's going on here? What are all these Policemen doing here?" She looked widely around, taking it all in.

"Who are you, Madam?" the detective asked.

"I am this boy's mother." To Jules' eternal embarrassment she hugged him tightly and kissed him on his cheek; Jules squirmed more violently than normal.

"Mum!" he tried to escape her clutches. "Get off!" he gasped. "Please." His mother released him. Jules noticed the detective and the Professor smiling.

This annoyed Jules and he stepped away from his mother and tidied his hair.

"What has happened? Has there been trouble with those animals from the blocks?" Mrs. Trull spat the query out.

"And you are, Sir?" the detective asked the Professor. Ignoring the woman.

"I am Professor Keble and I live here at the Lodge." The old man spoke clearly.

"Did you witness the incident this evening, Sir?"

"Oh, yes. The boy and I saw it all, I believe." The Professor nodded. He began to relate what they had seen. The detective made notes. He did not interrupt. When the Professor had finished, he seemed quite pleased to have been of service.

"And you say that you have both seen the car before?" the detective looked from the Professor to the boy. Jules nodded eagerly back. They had decided before leaving the Lodge that Jules would say as little as possible. "It's been here on a number of occasions over the past week or so?"

"Yes, detective," the Professor assured him. He repeated the fact that the windows were blacked-out and gave again a description of the occupants.

"Thank you," said the detective.

At the mention of guns firing Jules' mother had tried to put her arm around her son. But Jules shot her a nasty look. She recoiled from the intensity of the glare. The detective had noticed this.

"Finally, Sir, what were you and the boy doing all evening, if I may ask?" Jules also saw the frown that quickly crossed the Professor's face. He imagined that he had been asked similar questions at times in his past. The Professor drew a breath, but before he could reply Mrs. Trull spoke out.

"Oh! The Professor is very good to my boy," she gushed. "He spends hours with Julian. Teaching him all sorts of things." She seemed oblivious to how this might seem to some these days. "He has learnt Latin and Greek. He knows all about those funny looking writings from the old days. He's going to be a famous scholar, my boy is." She got an arm around Jules. "Just like his famous tutor." She beamed her gratitude at the Professor.

"Thank you, Madam," the Professor inclined his head politely. "It is my pleasure and privilege to instruct the boy." Jules was squirming for a different reason, but he sensed the hidden implication in the detective's question and was annoyed, again. At that point another detective called to Robin over to him. A brief conversation followed during which both men glanced at Jules' mother and smiled in an odd way. Jules felt his mother stand more upright beside him and glancing at her he could see a defiance in her face as she watched the detectives. Jules scowled angrily at the men. Instinctively he put his arm around his mother. She smiled but kept her eyes on the detectives. The Professor made a clucking noise and rocked, slightly, on his heels alongside mother and son.

Ed's dad was being interviewed by another officer. He had exchanged waves with Jules' mother earlier. The Professor had decided to invite Jules and his mother inside for some tea. He was about to make his offer when a new vehicle arrived. It pulled up smartly beside the two detectives. A bald man got out. The detectives straightened up and approached the more senior detective. Jules could see them reporting to their boss. But the new man did not look behind

him, he kept his gaze towards the tip. Eventually he spoke to his detectives and as he spoke the detectives glanced towards Jules and the two most important adults in his life. This time the looks were of unconcealed interest.

The senior officer finally came over to them.

"Mrs. Trull," he smiled a greeting.

"Chief Inspector," Jules mother plainly knew him. Jules scowled at the new Policeman. However, the Chief Inspector smiled through the boy's hostility.

"And you must be the young scholar," he said with some certainty. "Your mother is very proud of you, I know." He glanced back to Jules' mother who smiled. "And your tutor has the highest hopes for you." The Professor agreed. "Keep it up, Jules." The man looked right into Jules' eyes, but Jules did not feel uncomfortable, this man was respectful to his mother and he knew the Professor. Jules softened his attitude.

"It is encouraging to see something good here, amongst the dreadful depression of this place. All the squalor and degradation of these sort of people." He gestured vaguely over his shoulder.

"Professor, a word please." The Chief Inspector ushered the old man to one side out of hearing range for Jules. They talked quickly and quietly. The senior Policeman listened more. As the conversation finished both men seemed to pull at their lower lips and each spoke one word. Jules was watching them closely.

The Chief Inspector walked back to his men. He summoned his detectives and gave more orders. Once again there were glances towards them, but more puzzled this time and directed more to the Professor.

"Time for bed, I believe." The Professor was talking to Jules and his mother. "I will see you tomorrow, yes." It was not a question. "Good night to you, Mrs. Trull." The Professor nodded respectfully. He walked to the Lodge entrance.

"Bye, Professor." Jules called back. His mother had smiled very graciously. She now led him home. It was past midnight. All through the time spent watching the Police and answering their questions, Jules' mobile had throbbed inside his trousers, he had switched off the sound.

Later, he lay in bed texting his friends. Ed had found out what had happened from his dad, but he needed details. From their bedrooms the girls had been aware of the sirens and seen the lights flashing. They had contacted Ed, but they, too, wanted more details from Jules. It was after one in the morning before Jules attempted to go to sleep. It was some wonder that he had managed to flee his tormentors the next day.

Chapter 8

The first weekend of the Summer holidays started slowly for Jules. After the incident late Thursday night his mother had decided to keep him close. She did not allow him to visit the Professor on Friday night. Jules emailed the old academic so that he would not worry about his non-arrival. To his surprise the Professor managed to email a pleasant and understanding reply. Jules watched the TV with his mother and listened, with growing dismay, to the long list of jobs she wanted his help with. It seemed to him that he was going to be busy in other ways this Summer.

The weekly shopping trip was completed on Saturday morning then they had tea and toast. It was raining heavily, and Jules was glad that he was not crawling on his belly through the undergrowth at that moment. For the rest of the day he helped his mother 'Spring clean' in the Summer; they swept and scrubbed the house. They took it in turns to go up the step ladder with the other supporting from below. It seemed to Jules that his mother was contemplating decorating several rooms. He wondered where the money was coming from. Normally his mother did less 'work' in the Summer. Especially since it was clear that he was aware how the money was earned.

Perhaps because of Thursday night's examining looks, or because of their work together, mother and son felt closer. They enjoyed Saturday and Jules

forgot about the Professor for a while. The only thing that spoilt it for mother was the frequent phone calls between son and friends. What did these kids today have to talk about? It seemed that an hour could not go by without each of them ringing the others.

Just going shopping. I'm looking for ...

Just back from shopping. I got ...

What are you doing now?

I just scored my best at ...

Have you heard this?

We're about to have lunch and it's ...

On it went all day. The endless, trivial chatter of youth: Mrs. Trull failed to see the need for such 'continuous contact'. At one point her own mobile rang, but she did not take the call then, in front of Jules. It was about the only low point in the entire day, Jules thought later. Before he turned his light off that night, he finished the book on ancient mythologies. In his dreams he chased a figure through underground tunnels ... It turned into his mother ... She was wearing one of the Professor's cardigans ... To Jules' horror she was about to cut Ed's lower lip off ... She had a magnificent dagger and Ed was saying it was for the best ... Ed held his mobile where it could capture the act ... Jules woke with a start and wondered where Collette's mother had gone.

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Jules brought the Professor's book to the breakfast table on Sunday. His mother took the hint and said they had made a good start on the Summer's jobs. She suggested that Jules return the book. Besides she had something to do later. She slipped this last thing in quietly at the end of breakfast. Jules noted that she did not look him in the eye as she told him. He mumbled an acknowledgement. Then he surprised his mother by giving her a light kiss on her cheek. She stared at him with watery eyes as he left the kitchen.

Something had clicked within Jules during the last few days. It was difficult to put his finger on it, or at what exact point it had occurred. But he realised as he began to crawl through his bolt hole that he had come to terms with his circumstances. He loved his mother. He was unhappy with the method she used to keep them from starving. But he was not in a position, yet, to do anything about it. He meant it very much when he told his mother to 'take care'. For the first time he began to consider what he could do if he did not continue with his education.

So deep was he in thought that he almost missed them. As he got to his feet the other side of his wall's bolt hole, he noticed footprints, or boot prints to be more accurate: they were bigger than his; about the same size as Ed's. The ground was still heavy from Saturday's rain and he could easily follow the

tracks as they followed one of the beaten trails. But soon the thick growth stopped the imprints from being made. The already trampled path yielded no fresh signs that he could tell. He began to move as carefully as he could as he headed for the den.

At the den he quickly checked the edges for any obvious evidence of intrusion. Then he covered the grassy area looking for any fresh disturbances of any kind. It seemed to be clear of any apparent interference. He stood by the stream and listened. He stayed there for a few minutes. Nothing unusual, he concluded, mainly birdsong, and he wished again that he could distinguish between the various sounds. He knew the Wren, one of the Tits, the Blackbird of course, and one of the Finches - Pigeons, Magpies and Crows did not count as they were so obvious.

As he listened, he began to get that strange feeling. The one where you feel someone is watching you, or behind you. He could not stop himself from turning sharply, several times. He peered into the ferns and brambles surrounding the den but could see nothing out of the ordinary. But the feeling persisted and before he left their 'secret' place he rang Ed. Jules explained the situation. He half expected, or hoped, that Ed would be outraged and come storming through to help him search for the intruders. But Ed was strangely subdued. It took Jules a few carefully chosen questions to find out what was wrong. Ed and his dad had rowed about a game. One of them had accused the other of cheating. It was not clear who; Jules did not push it. The result was

that father and son were not talking. Mr. Toper had in fact left the house early to go drinking, Jules was not worried, when this had happened in the past Mr. Toper had eventually returned, drunk, but ready to make it up with his son. He had never hit Ed.

Jules was about to leave the den when a thought hit him. He was standing on the steppingstones. He rang the Professor, he whispered into his mobile.

"Professor, I'm in the den. Someone has crawled under my bolt hole." He described what he had seen. "They might still be here. Watching me now." The Professor grunted at the other end.

"Do you want me to come through your bolt hole? Or shall I go back and use the road?" there was a long pause, the Professor was weighing up the options. To Jules' mind he might as well use the bolt hole. If someone was watching they would see where it was. But then if they had found his bolt hole and went looking for another into the Lodge. Then it would only be a matter of time before they discovered it anyway. Perhaps they could block the scramble hole later.

"Come through the hole anyway, Jules." The Professor had made his mind up. "I will be waiting for you on my side."

"OK, Professor." Jules crossed to the bank and made his way towards the Lodge bolt hole - he stopped often - he thought he could make out the sound of cracking twigs behind him. Slowly he became more and more edgy. Finally, after what seemed an age, he saw the tell-tale brambles hiding the entrance. He

ran to them. He had promised himself that he would not give in to fear and run, but at the end he buckled.

Standing at the wall lifting the brambles he suddenly realised he would be at his most vulnerable as he crawled through the gap. Someone could rush out and grab him, pulling him back by the legs. He dropped the brambles and gave the undergrowth another scrutiny. It was impossible to tell if anyone was out there. If they were fast enough, they could get to him. He felt his heart pounding in his chest and his ears were also throbbing; his breathing was laboured, his chest heaving; the sweat was clammy on his face; a wild-eyed look was in his face and his hands were shaking.

"Are you there, my boy?" he heard the Professor through the wall.

"Coming." Jules answered. But he made no move. If he went in backwards, something he had never done, he could see anyone who came after him, but it would be slower. He needed to get to the other side. He would not be safe this side. If he went the normal way, it would be quicker, but he could be grabbed.

"Come on, Jules." The Professor was losing patience. Jules lifted the brambles, dropped to the ground and scrambled faster than he had ever done into the hole. As his head and shoulders appeared the other side the Professor grabbed him and pulled him through. Jules spun on the ground and tried to look back. But the brambles had fallen back into place and he could see nothing through them. He got to his feet. The Professor had propped the brambles his side with a stick; he now kicked the stick away.

"Come on boy, quick." He headed for the house. Jules rushed to follow him, brushing himself off. As the old man bolted the back-door Jules could see the revolver in a cardigan pocket.

"Quick, upstairs." The Professor hurried off. When they reached the large room on the third floor the Professor picked something up off the table.

"Use these." He threw them at Jules. Snatching them from the air Jules could see that they looked like glasses. However, they were much 'chunkier' than his glasses with what looked like funny coloured lenses. The Professor was at the window looking back at the wood.

"What are they?" Jules had joined him holding out the glasses.

"Do you not know?" the Professor seemed a little disappointed.

"Some kind of thermal imaging glasses," Jules suggested. He saw the nod of the head as he put the glasses on.

"With those I was able to follow you, and your tail." The Professor told him. Jules scanned the area. There, behind a tight group of young trees he spotted an image; it was hard to tell if it was male or female. He popped the glasses, momentarily onto his forehead. In normal vision he could see nothing. Then to his amazement the large man broke cover and scampered over to the wall. He was lost to sight behind the high wall. Jules turned to the Professor. The old academic had the gun in his hand. They stared at the place where the brambles hid the bolt hole. But after a few minutes the man came into view walking back

to the beaten path. He stopped and looked back, once, he must have been able to see them in the window.

"Cocky sod, isn't he!" Jules said out loud.

"He is making sure we know he knows where the bolt hole is." The Professor responded. The man disappeared into the wood. The Professor put the gun back in his pocket. Jules realised he was shaking as he handed back the thermal glasses.

"Pretty cool, Professor. Ed would really love them."

"Yes, I expect he would." The Professor smiled at him.

"Where did you get them?"

"A member brought them for me, yesterday." The old man turned, "amongst other things, such as a fresh biscuit supply." He handed Jules a book. "First some tea, and biscuits, then on with the work." He headed off to the kitchen. Jules sat at the big table and opened the book.

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The first theme for the day was the protection of old relics, chambers, buildings: this was from the builders' and original owners' viewpoint. The book was superbly illustrated, the Professor described the usually lethal measures known

to have been used by people from the ancients to relatively modern days. His knowledge was experience based and the Professor related how he and other members of the 'Order' had taken part in many excavations, not all of them legitimate it appeared. The Professor explained that sometimes they had to act to stop important objects falling into the wrong hands and they had not always been successful.

They had been at Troy with the dodgy German guy. Also, in the Valley of the Kings with Carter. Many famous digs through history and many unheard-of ones too. The Professor explained that the Lodge was really a depository of information, within it lay the knowledge accrued over centuries of discovery, research and translation. There were no real physical treasures at the Lodge aside from the paper type. The 'Order of Gilgamesh' saw to it that many artifacts were returned to their rightful places. These objects were as safe in a museum as anywhere else, normally. Manuscripts, tablets, books and any general papers were also often returned. Sometimes mysteriously donated or even left where the right people could find them. Copies were made of everything that came into the possession of the 'Order'. This was a large part of the Professor's job; original translation was also very important.

The 'Order' had sometimes left great finds where they had been found, only recording the means of finding them again. They did not try to recover everything. Sometimes they were impossible to get at because of the measures taken by private collectors, or impossible to get to because of hostile

governments and regimes. Hidden here, and known only to a few, those who were able to translate the obscure, lay the answers to many mysteries. The Professor claimed that it might be possible to throw light on: Alexander's lost palaces in Persia and India; undiscovered lost cities throughout the Americas; the tomb of Genghis Khan; perhaps the oldest, ever, civilisations hidden still in Sub-Sahara Africa; the place where the first city was built; Egyptian treasure houses; forgotten temples of the Middle East; original writings of ancient scholars rescued from the Alexandria Library. The list went on. The Professor highlighted the potential discoveries of the written word: the lost tablets from Mesopotamia and Egypt; early Indian and Tibetan scrolls; secret Arab manuscripts hidden from Islam; Renaissance technology; Viking maps.

The Professor revealed that in much of his research the final clues were missing. He believed the answers, or at least the way to find the answers lay in the chamber under the den. He told how in some cases the 'Order' had made sure relics and other objects had been given to museums, content in the knowledge that they had been wrongly translated and interpreted. In some cases, they had constructed fakes intended to confuse and mislead. The skill to do this had been largely lost though.

Jules' head was swimming with all the images and soundbite-like snippets of information. He decided to bring the talk back to the present.

"So, what's with the lower lip stuff?" he looked the old man straight in the eye. "Professor?" the Professor blinked at him.

"What do you mean, boy?" the old man's voice was quiet.

"I mean this stuff," Jules mimicked what he had seen, "what you and the Chief cop did." The old man had a glint in his eye.

"You do not miss much, do you, my boy?"

"I try not to."

The Professor leaned towards him and pulled his lower lip away from his gum. Jules could see a symbol on the inside of his lip; it did not look like a tattoo. It was not familiar to him.

"Only when you have been a member of the 'Order' for many years. And proved yourself worthy at all times will you be branded with the mark."

"It is burnt into you?" Jules screwed his face up.

"Yes. And it is jolly painful, my boy." The Professor was giving him one of those calculating looks again. "I hope to be there when you get yours, Jules." But Jules did not appear to be relishing the prospect. "I have a feeling you will qualify earlier than anyone else has."

"I don't see the point in special marks and signs and what have you." Jules said. "It is too easy to spot when you know what you are looking for." He continued, "it gives the game away too easily. Your enemies can tell you apart. They know what to look for."

"Perhaps you are right." The Professor replied. "But sometimes you have to show that you believe. Sometimes it is necessary to make a stand and show that you are part of something that is greater than the individual. To show you

belong." Jules said nothing. He thought about people, tattoos, the body piercing these days, they were all done to stand out in the crowd, they were not the mark of secret 'Orders'.

"What is it?" Jules asked the Professor. "I don't recognise it."

"My boy, in your short time with me we have barely scratched the surface."

The Professor seemed to be wrestling with a decision. They looked at each other for an endless minute.

"It is the mark of the King."

"Gilgamesh?"

"No, it predates him. It is from a script known only to 'The Order of Gilgamesh'. It is from the first script. The very first script, from the first great civilisation, the original that spawned all the others that came after. I can show you how the later scripts were developed from it - even the far eastern ones."

"Atlantis?" Jules smiled doubtfully.

"No. I do not think so." The Professor's eyes gleamed once more. "No, I think it was before even Atlantis, my boy. In fact, I am quite sure."

The Professor then spent time teaching Jules the passwords of 'The Order of Gilgamesh'. They mainly involved names associated with the Epic and incidents in the King's life. The Professor drilled and tested Jules more thoroughly on this than any other thing they had covered together. Jules swore to tell no one unless his life and the 'Order' was at stake; which despite

everything that had happened and that he had been told, he felt was over-the-top.

Chapter 9

The main topic of conversation in the next few days for the four friends was holidays. Not their Summer holiday and all the six glorious weeks of it. Jules was the only one who would develop any kind of desire to return to school during this period. No, it was the girls' family holiday. Collette was going to an exclusive resort on a West Indian island. Rosie was going on a combined holiday to Corsica and Sardinia. The girls excitedly showed the boys the brochures. The boys made polite noises and asked the right questions. They looked at the beautiful pictures. They whistled softly at the prices.

The sort of holiday the girls were about to enjoy was far away from anything the boys might have. Normally they went nowhere during the long holidays. Sometimes they were taken on the occasional day trip. Favourite places were Porthcawl and Barry Island in south Wales, or Weston-Super-Mare and Minehead in Somerset. This only happened when Mr. Toper and Mrs. Trull pooled their resources. It usually coincided with a big win for Ed's dad and a lucrative client for Jules' mum. The mum and dad would hire a car; they both drove but could not afford to run a car every day. Mr. Toper would drive to the seaside. He enjoyed a drink during the day, so Mrs. Trull drove them back. They set off very early and arrived back very late. It was not much but the boys appreciated it. For a day at least, they were spoilt rotten.

The boys were a little envious of the girls. But the whole holiday thing was a Summer ritual that they were used to. When the girls returned there would be endless photos to enthuse over. If anything, it drew the boys closer during the holiday period, as if they had not spent enough time together during the term. However, they were able to tell when each one was getting bored with the other. Jules in recent years had the Professor to share his time with. Ed would wander off and maintain a dubious kind of relationship with the yobs in the tower blocks and beyond.

On the first Monday of the holidays Ed and Jules had scoured the whole enclosed wood. They were looking for more signs of the intruder. No one else was around as far as they could tell. There were a few patches of newly trampled growth which were mostly just to the side of the beaten paths. At the second den they found hard evidence of an incursion that Ed could accept; Jules had felt that he was not taking the exercise seriously. He had the impression that Ed thought Jules and the Professor were a bit batty really. Seeing assassins and danger every time they looked out the window. Ed's dad had told him that the cops had decided the business with the blacked-out car was drug related. Ed's dad had met one of the detectives outside the bookies.

But when Ed found the chewing gum wrapper on the ground of the second den, he became more interested. Jules found a discarded blob of gum stuck to one of the trees: he did not pull it off. The second den had very little grass, it was really four trees whose low branches were easy to climb into. Any time

spent there saw them reclined in the branches, sheltering from a strong Sun, normally. It was a cool, shady refuge, if you did not mind the Ants running up and down the tree trunks and the sticky leaves. The girls, however, were never keen. They always had the right equipment to stay out in the Sun: lotion; sunglasses; parasols; stylish hats.

On discovery of the hard evidence; the gum was American and none of them had seen it before. Ed wanted to be told, again, what Jules had learnt from the old Professor. Jules recounted almost all of it, stressing the parts of finding treasure of all kinds. The girls performed an exercise routine while Jules spoke. They were only vaguely interested in the intrigue. Jules thought they might show some concern that a strange man had been inside their 'secret garden'. He might be some kind of 'paedo'. He could be ogling them now from some hidden vantage point, one they had not discovered. But, for some reason, as soon as Jules had told them the man, he had seen was the large man from the Merc. they had relaxed. He felt that they were also not taking him seriously. There was an air of condescension whenever they talked about Jules and the Professor, and Jules was beginning to be irritated by it.

Monday evening Jules reported their finds to the Professor. He merely nodded as if he had been expecting it.

"America is where the money to finance raids comes from. America is where the most unscrupulous collectors live. The man is more than likely hired muscle here to help her and keep an eye on her too." The Professor passed Jules

a book on tomb defences. "He is unlikely to have any specialist knowledge in our field." The Professor smirked. "Dangerous, no doubt, but not a scholar." Jules was studying a particularly grotesque, swinging, barbed wooden defence. It was triggered by stepping on a floor stone. This set-in motion a system of hidden levers and released a weight. The Kinetic energy of the falling weight was transferred to the frame which broke through a flimsy plaster covering and swung into the victim.

"A good friend grew tired and careless with one of them," the Professor pointed out to him. "It was in Nubia." The Professor's face was solemn. "He bled to death in only one minute. There was nothing we could do." Jules stared at the diagram. "Of course, some of them are tipped in poison and can kill you more or less instantly!" the Professor spoke grimly. Jules continued to study the ways to guard against being caught by them.

"The woman is the dangerous one." The Professor suddenly said aloud. Jules looked up. "She has knowledge, good knowledge. She is a sworn enemy of the Order' and she works for the highest bidder. We have had losses fighting with her and her bosses." The Professor drifted away into unpleasant memories. The rest of the evening the Professor described the various devices in the book. For each one he had a tale or an experience to share. The unfortunate demise of a friend and colleague, or the foolishness of a competitor and foe. These included: hidden drops; hidden poisoned darts; hidden falling and swinging slabs; toxic waters and plants; acid gases released into unsuspecting faces;

corridors that became closed off; chambers that filled with sand or water. It was perilous being a real 'Indiana Jones', even more than in the movies.

On Tuesday morning Jules got an urgent email from the Professor. He wanted to see him immediately. Jules' mother insisted he had breakfast first. The Professor had said to come to the front entrance. As Jules hurried along the road, he kept a watchful eye for any sign of other people and cars. He saw nothing except Ed's dad in the distance. They waved at each other. Jules knew where Ed's dad was headed. Over breakfast Jules had texted Ed to let him know what he was up to. Ed had replied that he was meeting the girls as usual in the den. Jules thought he would be busy with the Professor all day. He would make it if he could.

The Professor had been waiting for him. Jules knocked; the front door opened immediately. The old man ushered him inside. Jules frowned because the revolver was in his hand.

"The news is not good, my boy!" he shook his head and bolted the front door. "Not good at all." He led the way upstairs. "The enemy is making moves. My spies have reported activity." They had reached the third floor. "There might be an attempt to get certain information from the Lodge."

"What information, Professor?" Jules had never seen the old academic in such a state. He was very jittery. The gun had been returned to a cardigan pocket. The Professor was restless and paced from window to window. Any sound of a vehicle on the road and he rushed to get a view of it.

"What has happened, Professor?" Jules sat down.

"What are they after? Who is it?" Jules was becoming infected by the Professor's nervousness.

"Is it that woman?" Jules had said the right thing. The old man stopped pacing and he came and sat across the table from Jules. It must be serious, thought Jules, there had been no offer of tea.

"I am afraid, much sooner than I would have wished my boy, I am going to place you in danger." There was a determined look in his eyes. It cut off the rising mirth inside Jules. The smile never reached his face. The Professor was in deadly earnest.

"This thing will not be much use when they come." He cast the revolver onto the table. It slid against a pile of papers. Jules was surprised. The Professor was fidgeting in his chair.

"What are they after exactly?" Jules asked him.

"Something that is not written down on any paper here." He swept his hand around the room. "Something that is kept up here, my boy!" he put a finger to a temple.

"Have you found out how to get into the chamber under the den?" Jules asked him, the Professor nodded wisely.

"Well, I at least know where to look for a key of some sort." He qualified his admission.

"Well?! What is it? Where is it?" Jules demanded. Excitement was welling up inside him. But the Professor had fallen silent. Jules began to worry that this was all he was going to get from the old academic, that he had perhaps had second thoughts about involving Jules. He decided that he had to be patient and wait for the Professor to come to a decision.

"This is a good time for some tea," he announced. The Professor was deep in thought again. Jules shook the old man's shoulders, gently.

"What, my boy?"

"Tea, Professor?"

"Oh, good idea, my boy!" Jules left him to his deliberations. On his return he could tell from the look on the Professor's face that a decision had been made. As Jules poured the tea the Professor began to speak.

"I will not tell you everything, my boy. It is too dangerous. I doubt they are aware how much you know already - she will not believe that I have told you so much. If they find out what you know, then they may come after you!"

The Professor and Jules then made plans for contingencies. At least ones the old man could imagine. The most likely occurrence was the abduction of the Professor. All he would say was that if this happened then it meant they were going to force him to reveal the whereabouts of something, something he would not tell Jules about, but would leave the means to tell him hidden in the room. Jules tried to hide his growing annoyance with the Professor. He might as well tell him everything now. Who was he going to tell? His friends all thought it

was a joke anyway. The Professor admitted that Jules lacked the skill to make the information available. So why the secrecy about where the missing link could be found? The old man sensed the growing frustration in his prodigy.

"If this all blows up in our faces," he told him. "The worst that could happen is that they kill me before they get the information." Jules listened wide-eyed. "But if that happens you might still be able to carry on the work, follow in my footsteps and come to the same conclusions. But if you get dragged into this, too early, they might kill you too." The old man meant it.

"If they take me. You know what to do." There was a finality to his voice. Their tea had gone cold. "I will refresh this brew." He collected the teacups.

"I think you should at least make copies of all the vital papers and stuff," Jules told him once more. "She might destroy them, burn them or something when they nab you."

"Oh, my boy! She will not destroy anything. She knows that there are many secrets waiting to be exposed here, many more than the present trouble concerns. She knows that if they stay here someone else will come along and do the work and then she can pounce again. She is more likely to remove the papers and 'stuff', as you call it. That would be more of a problem. They would prove difficult to retrieve; I have no doubt."

"So why not copy as much as possible?" Jules pressed.

"But the copies might fall into the wrong hands."

"But you said you are one of the few people with the skill to translate a lot of it. What good would it do them?"

"But they could work on it, perhaps, find a way. It might be done in time."

"Yes, it might. But if we still have our copies then we can still be working on it and we will always have a head start!" The Professor thought for a long minute. Jules sensed a weakening.

"If I got the girls and Ed to help, we could scan a huge amount of stuff in one day. Tomorrow say?" the Professor was faltering. "We could load the scans into our computers, make copies on disks. You could hide one here. Send one to a trustworthy member of the 'Order' for safe keeping. If some copies are taken or destroyed, we should still have other copies safe in our possession."

"But all that information, out there where it could be seen." Lingering doubts.

"But the real information is locked away up there," Jules pointed a finger at the Professor's head. "That is where the means to make sense of it all is. If we lose you, we lose more, much more than if one copy finds the light of day, to be puzzled over by lesser minds."

The Professor looked deep into Jules' eyes. For the first time he felt real commitment from the boy, and he was right. Better the information still at large in the world, somewhere, rather than lost forever. If it came to that, 'The Order of Gilgamesh' would have to revitalise itself and become more proactive, as they said in these days.

"Fine, I agree." The Professor went down the stairs. Jules immediately rang his friends. Ed had the scanner, so he was essential. He agreed to help right away. The girls, however, were less keen. They thought the Professor was creepy. They had never been in the old man's house and intended to keep it that way. Jules begged them. In the end they agreed but only if Ed or Jules guaranteed to be in the house with them all the time.

It was a long job. It needed the four of them to take it in turns to do the scanning as it would have been very tiring for one person. Ed brought the disks they needed, and they made copies as they went along. They also had their four computers radio linked and copies were made at their computers. As the four of them were going to keep their own sets of copies Jules kept warning them how important they were. They had to find somewhere safe to keep them: Ed was going to mix them up with his vast game collection; Jules had no idea what the girls were going to do with theirs. They became so fed up with Jules' constant fussing that they decided not to tell him.

The Professor seemed to be having doubts, again, in the morning. But he soon became absorbed in the task; he delighted in thinking up file names for the accumulating data. When this was not happening quick enough for Jules he merely looked unhappily at his pupil and bemoaned the lack of patience in the young - if the files were badly named, then it would cost them time in the future. The girls began to warm to the old man. It helped that he had managed to buy ice cream, cakes and drinks of pop, which he gave them during the far

too many breaks they had, according to Jules. The Professor did not give them any 'pervy' looks, that they reported, anyway.

All the material they were scanning meant nothing to the girls, or Ed. They were sure to forget all about the disks soon after. They were happy to help Jules really. He was a good friend. They commented afterwards, when they were alone, on the curious relationship between Jules and the Professor. Like teacher and pupil, but also like father and son sometimes. Often it was hard to tell who in the relationship was who! It made them laugh.

When it was all over Ed ordered them all a takeaway and the Professor paid. He cleared a large space on the table. Jules had never seen the table so empty of documents. As they were eating the Professor remarked that in his time at the Lodge there had never been more than two people sat at this table, eating. Finally, the girls and Ed left. Ed walked them through the wood to their back doors. Somehow the girls' parents had no idea what they had been involved in that day. Jules left the Professor soon after. He was tired, but he wanted to have a look at the disks too, so he rushed home along the road. However, his mother nagged him until he turned his lights out, earlier than he had intended.

Chapter 10

The following day Jules rose early. He had been at his computer for an hour when his mother arose, he heard her in the bathroom while he was busy trying to translate some Phoenician. It seemed to be written at the time of the founding of Carthage and it was quite dull material: reports for merchants detailing goods traded on a journey around the Mediterranean Sea; several ports and places were named, Jules thought they were most probably modern-day Palermo, Malta and Alexandria, there was also a place in Israel, but he was not sure where this was exactly.

His mother called him twice before he responded, however, he stayed in front of the screen, various books across his lap and spread at his feet. Eventually his mother came into his room and forced him downstairs for his breakfast. Jules answered a text from Ed, telling him he thought he was going to be busy at home today and he doubted he would make it to the den. There were loads more for him to work on, he told his friend. Jules was realising that he should draw up a 'things to do' list, an order of priority for him to concentrate his effort. But what was he most interested in?

The Professor did not get in touch with him. Jules guessed the academic was engaged in similar activities. Jules had lost count of the times, during the scanning, when the Professor had exclaimed, "well, I never ... Forgot all about this ... I must look at this again, soon." It seemed to Jules that the Professor

had not been as thorough and methodical as he made out; he had frequently jumped from one piece of research to another without properly completing the first. Jules thought the old academic was tying up loose ends and this could keep him busy for some time, unless he received another scare. Jules did not communicate with his tutor, he wanted to be left alone as well.

There could only be one priority for Jules once he stopped to consider. He would start going through the sources linked to the old estate and 'The Order of Gilgamesh'. He wanted to see the records for himself. His Latin and Greek dictionaries and phrase books were going to come in very useful and he had them piled up at the ready - paper and pencils were also to hand.

Jules' mother went out at lunchtime - Jules barely noticed - she had left him a salad to eat. But he had only picked at it, the tomatoes had been eaten but little else. His mother tutted to herself as she left. If Ed had seen her leave in a taxi, he would have thought she was too glamorously dressed for a warm Summer's day. But Jules had been too occupied to appreciate how his mother looked. At the time he was struggling with a particularly difficult piece of translation. He almost rang the Professor for help but decided against it. He used the internet instead which was nowhere near as quick, but it helped him.

However, as the afternoon rolled towards the evening, he tired. He had managed a lot, but a certain frustration had set in. It was going to take time, he could see now, perhaps really for the first time, why the Professor had been working for so long. He had made progress, but it was slower than he imagined

it would be. What he had learnt had filled in the details of the Professor's story: nothing new or different, yet, Jules did not believe he would find any significant discrepancies. However, he felt that if he was going to get involved in the 'Order', he had to see for himself the background. If he was to take the Professor's place, he had to catch up. If the old man's fears were founded, he would have to catch up very quickly!

Hoping that the Professor would be around for a few years yet, Jules ate his dried salad. Suddenly, he remembered his friends and decided to see if they were still in the den; his texts and calls were not being answered. The thought of the cool stream appealed, he decided to go into the wood, Mum was not likely to be back soon, and he could relax in the den for an hour or two.

.....

Birds sang all around as Jules scrambled under the wall. The ground was much drier now. He got to his feet and breathed deeply; the smell of wood and green plants. He swatted a persistent fly and watched it fall to the ground. Moving through the wood he was buzzed by flies, wasps and bees, butterflies flew in and out of the growth. Some birds took flight at his approach. Fat pigeons

flapped noisily from tree to tree and a lone crow cawed loudly and supremely.

Jules caught a glimpse of him, strutting, on the Lodge chimneys.

Jules was practising being as quiet as he could. He crept slowly and carefully along the path that led to the den. Then he heard it. The sound of giggling ahead. From the den. It was his friends. They were there. Why hadn't they replied to him? Then something about the sounds made him listen more closely. There were pauses between the giggles. It seemed to be the girls giggling. But not at the same time. It seemed that Ed was making heavy, content sighs. Then all three laughed together. Jules thought he would sneak up on them and scare them. That would teach them for ignoring him! He crept closer.

As he came to the edge of the tall ferns, he heard a soft slopping sound. It was the stream he thought. But then as he slowly pulled a fern to one side, he had a shock. On the den Ed was lying flat out. The girls were lying on top of him and the slopping sound was the girls taking it in turn to kiss Ed. Not just on his cheeks but full on the mouth! Jules snapped the fern he was hiding behind. The sudden noise made him jump. He looked at the broken stem in his hands. He had not realised how tight he had been holding it.

When he looked back to the den the girls had rolled off Ed. They were getting to their feet. Ed was sitting up and looking towards his position, unable to see him.

"Who's there?" Ed demanded. "Is that you Jules?" the girls were brushing the grass off themselves. They pulled their skirts and tops back to shape. Jules saw Rosie hastily do up her top buttons.

"Professor?" Ed called out. But his voice was uncertain. Jules thought for a second, hesitated, then he burst through the ferns. Ed relaxed. The girls scowled at him but turned away to finish tidying themselves as Jules said, "you've got stuff in your hair."

"Been there long, Jules?" Ed asked him calmly. Jules saw the girls' shoulders stiffen. Ed was watching him closely.

"No, not really." Jules was deliberately vague. "I thought I might sneak up you. But you heard me, obviously." The girls gave each other a quick look. Ed lay back down. Jules thought a look or sign passed between him and the girls.

"So, what were you lot up to?" Jules decided to turn the screw. The girls were red faced, he noticed. Jules looked directly at them. Collette stood tall.

"Nothing. What do you mean?" she replied. The tone was too defensive. Jules stared at her. He said nothing. She soon blushed and turned away to hide her face. Beside her Rosie was also blushing, she turned her head too, but it was to hide a giggle. Ed lay on the grass and looked very uninterested in anything.

"Oh, well, I think I'll join you doing nothing." Jules told them. He sat down by the stream. He could tell frantic gesticulating and mouthed words had broken out behind him. But he ignored it. He had realised that his first reaction

to seeing the three of them together had been jealousy. But now he was more curious.

Was this the first time they had been snogging in the den?

Or had it been going on for a while?

Would Ed tell him about it?

Did he really want to know?

He very much doubted he would be lucky enough to take Ed's place. It was just not going to happen. Then he became sad and was glad he had his back turned to them as his eyes filled. He struggled to prevent an incident, staring hard at the water until his eyes cleared.

Collette was having more trouble with Jules knowing what they had been doing. She did not sit back down with Rosie next to Ed, she kept adjusting her clothes and muttering quietly. Everybody ignored her. Then she clearly came to a decision.

"I'm going to get more pop." She crossed the stream in just two steps and disappeared into the growth following the path. Jules turned a questioning look to Ed and Rosie.

"The Professor has been giving us the drink," Rosie explained. "It's left over from yesterday." Jules nodded; he had noticed the empty cans on the ground.

"I think I'll go and help her." Rosie sprang to her feet and was quickly across the stream. The boys watched her go out of sight. Jules waited a few seconds.

"So?" he asked Ed.

"So, what?" Ed shrugged.

"So, what's going on?" Jules was quite desperate to know more.

"Nothing." Ed was staring into the sky.

"Nothing?" Jules gasped. "Nothing going on with you and the girls?"

"Nothing." He repeated.

"Nothing you want to tell me?" Jules tried to get him to look at him.

"No."

"Oh, alright! Nothing happened today. Or any other days for that matter."

Jules was hurt that Ed would not confide in him. There was a strained silence between them.

"Look, I promised the girls I wouldn't tell you, alright?" Ed now looked at Jules. "It's the first time and nothing happened anyway. Alright?"

"Oh, I see it's the first time nothing happened, is it?" Jules' voice was bitchy. Ed lay back down.

"Leave it, Jules." Jules was going to say something else but stopped himself in time. Oh! What the hell! It would pain him to know anyway!

They talked no more about it. In fact, they said nothing to each other for a long time - each lost in very different thoughts. The birds sang. The insects buzzed. The stream bubbled.

"Where have the girls got to?" it had suddenly occurred to Jules that something was missing.

"How long has it been?" Ed was checking his watch. Jules stood up and tried to listen, he heard Ed get to his feet, he was brushing himself with his hands, but Jules could not hear the girls coming back.

"Come on, let's find them." Ed passed Jules. "They've got quite chatty with the old man since yesterday, probably still with him." Jules followed him. He was glad the girls liked the Professor now. They reached the wall and Ed held the brambles up for Jules. The smaller boy scrambled through the bolt hole. He returned the favour on the other side as the larger boy dragged himself into the Lodge's back garden.

The back door was wide open. They could hear no voices. Jules felt his stomach turn. He glanced up at the third-floor window. Nothing. The boys looked at each other.

"Professor! Professor!" Jules shouted.

"Rosie! Collette!" Ed yelled. Nothing.

"Professor!" Jules tried again.

"Rosie! Collette!" Ed again.

Nothing.

Jules walked to the back door. Ed followed. Before Jules reached the door, he stopped and scanned the ground. There was a swathe in the fallen leaves on the ground. Jules bent down to have a closer look.

"Something's been dragged on the ground here." He announced. "Or someone." Ed looked sceptical, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah, sure," he passed by Jules and reaching the open door shouted inside.

"Rosie! Collette! Professor!"

Jules was using his foot to sift the fallen leaves. He bent down and picked something up.

"What's this then?" he showed Ed an earring.

"Rosie's." Ed said. They hurried into the kitchen. Cans of pop were on the floor and they kicked them accidentally. The cans rolled nosily around the kitchen. They stopped and listened again.

Nothing.

They shouted out once more.

Nothing.

Jules was quite frantic by now. Ed had a very worried look on his face. They ran out of the kitchen into the hall. The front door was ajar. They exchanged looks again. Jules moved to the door and looked out. He saw nothing unusual. He joined Ed at the foot of the stairs. They stared up. There was still no sound. They called out.

Nothing.

Together they climbed the stairs, slowly. Their ears were primed for the slightest noise. At one point a stair creaked as they trod on it. Both boys jumped. Their hearts were beating, and Jules' hands were shaking. They kept glancing behind them as they climbed. At the top they stopped. Not all the room was visible from the stairs. They scanned desperately for anyone. Jules

could see some papers and manuscripts scattered on the floor. They had been pushed off the table by the look of it, he thought. A patch of red glinted on the tabletop.

Jules rushed to the table. Ed cursed and held back.

"It's blood, Ed!" Ed joined him while looking around the rest of the room.

"Who's blood?" Ed asked.

"I don't know do I!" Jules looked at Ed as if he was stupid.

"This might tell us." Ed moved around the table and picked something up. It was one of the Professor's cardigans. There was fresh blood all over the collar. Ed dropped it hastily onto the table. Jules prodded it gingerly with a finger.

The revolver was missing.

The pipe and other bits were still in the other pocket.

"Professor!" Jules screamed out. He ran all around the third floor. He looked under and behind everything, then he rushed back down the stairs and went through every room in the house, calling out for the Professor all the time. Ed became caught up in his panic and he rushed about shouting for the girls.

But they were not there.

After ten minutes of blind panic driven searching and shouting, the boys stood on the third floor completely out of breath. There was only one conclusion: the girls and the Professor had been taken!

Chapter 11

The Professor had sensed some hostility from the two girls. He had only met them a couple of times, but it was there. More so from the tall classical looking one. She was a promising athlete according to Jules. The smaller one appeared a little more cheerful, he thought. Then he had felt their reluctance to be involved yesterday. At the beginning they were a little surly; they made it clear that they were there because of Jules, and Jules only. However, as the work progressed their attitude changed. Perhaps it was the 'goodies' to eat and drink that he had provided; the lady in the supermarket had obviously advised him well. Perhaps it was the excitement and interest that had so quickly overwhelmed Jules and himself. Had it been infectious? The girls were ignorant of the material and the reason for the scanning, yet they became curious and often asked him what a particularly 'funny looking thing' was. Perhaps it was because Jules became a little impatient and began bossing him about. Whatever it was, their attitude softened and by the end of the day as they ate their meal they were grinning and joking along with the boys.

Even with this thawing of their relationship, the Professor was quite surprised to hear a knock on his back door and find the two girls standing there. He checked his watch. Midday. The heat was rising. He could feel it more, here, at the back.

"Well, hello, Ladies." The Professor said, surprised. "What can I do for you?" he looked around expecting to see the boys poking around in the back garden, perhaps up the tree, but the girls appeared to be alone.

"Professor," the tall one, Collette, he seemed to remember, spoke cautiously. "We hope you don't think we're being rude." A quick glance at her friend, Rosie smiled sweetly at the old man and he beamed back at her.

"What is it?" the Professor smiled kindly up at the tall girl. "Something I can do for you two?" they smiled hopefully at him. "If I can help, in any way, I would be delighted to do so."

"Well, it's a hot day. We are with Ed in the den. We hoped if we could have some of the ..."

"Drinks from yesterday." The Professor interrupted her. "Of course! Come inside." The girls went into the kitchen.

"In the fridge, there," the Professor indicated. Rosie opened the door and began helping herself to some cans.

"You are welcome to all of them." The Professor told them. "I have no need for them."

"Oh, Professor! Thank you very much!" the girls were very grateful. The Professor beamed a big smile.

"But I think it would be best if you took what you need immediately. Leave the rest in the fridge. Then when you want them, come and get them. They will stay cold that way."

"Good idea!" Rosie closed the fridge door. She had removed six cans and placed them on the kitchen table.

"I will leave the back door open." The Professor told them. "Just shout up to me, so I know it is you, when you return for more." The girls thanked him. But they did not leave right away.

They lingered.

It became clear that they wanted to know more about what Jules and the Professor did together. He was happy to inform them, and he also wanted to learn something from them. They told him about the extent of the bullying that Jules suffered in school.

After an intensive ten-minute exchange, the girls waved goodbye and disappeared under the high wall and the Professor returned to his work. He wondered what Jules was working on. He could guess. He knew what he would be working on if he was in his place.

The afternoon soon went by.

At the time that Jules reached the edge of the ferns and looked in surprise at his friends. A black clothed figure emerged from the Lodge bolt hole. It was the large man. He silently crossed the garden to the back door. He tried the handle and was very pleased when the door opened for him. He moved into the kitchen, leaving the door open. He listened for a while at the kitchen door. The sound of the old man pacing the floor above was clear. Stealthily he crossed the hall and unbolted the front door.

The bolts made a slight scratching sound. But there was no noise of an approach from above. Instead two equally black figures slipped through the front entrance. A black Range Rover with blacked out windows lay outside; the engine was not running. The attractive, scarred woman whispered a command to the large man who quickly returned to the kitchen. The woman and her other accomplice, who was the same size as her, went to the foot of the stairs. There was always the chance the old fool had his revolver with him, the woman thought. She urged her man up the stairs. She had warned him about the creaking stair.

He soon reached the second floor. Looking up at him she motioned him to a room at the side. He slipped into the room noiselessly. Then she gave a signal to the large man. He walked into the back garden, slamming the back door behind him. The woman moved to the side and waited.

The Professor had stopped pacing and was stretching when the sound of the back door rang through the Lodge. He quickly went to the back window and looked out. He saw no one. He waited for a shout from one of the girls.

Nothing.

He checked the branches in the trees: a bit of swaying in the wind, but was it enough to cause the back door to slam? Hang on! He had shut the door behind the girls! It could not open by itself! He cursed under his breath. He put a hand into one pocket and put his fingers around his revolver - it helped to reassure him a little.

There had been no shout. He crept to the head of the stairs. He listened, although his heavy hoarse breathing was a distraction. Should he shout out? Perhaps it was Jules? But no, the boy knew better. He would call out to him. He decided to descend the stairs. He also knew where the creaking stair was. He had reached the first-floor landing when a familiar voice suddenly greeted him.

"Professor. Nice to see you again." How had he ever thought that voice pleasant? He would never know. He had jumped slightly as she emerged at the foot of the stairs. She was dressed in her now customary black. She did not have any weapons in her hands. He clenched the gun in his pocket.

"Oh, Professor, I would not consider using the revolver." She pointed to his pocket. "It would draw attention this way. And we would not want any," she paused, "youngsters, to get in the way. Would we? They might get hurt. Or worse." The, now sickly to him, wide smile returned to her face. She was still very pretty, he conceded. Despite the scar. He could understand the attraction for the boys.

"Oh, besides, I have another man behind you," she added. The Professor swiveled round. There, half a flight above him, stood another black clad scoundrel who was armed. His gun was aimed directly at his heart. The gun was very still in the man's hand. The woman climbed the stairs up to the old man. The Professor turned back to face her. When she reached him, she held

her hand out, the Professor gave a shrug and pulled out the gun. The man behind came a few steps closer.

"Careful, old man!" she warned him. The woman stared into the Professor's eyes. There was the trace of amusement in her dark eyes. The Professor placed the gun in her hand. She closed her hand around it and smiled triumphantly at the old man, then put the gun in a pocket of her own. Suddenly, she struck the Professor. He gasped in surprise and fell back onto the landing floor. The man came even closer. His gun never wavered in its aim.

"That's for old times' sake!" the woman spoke calmly. "I have so been looking forward to that." She examined her hand. Without warning again, she bent over and hit the old man once more. This time the back of his head banged against the floor and he grunted in pain, blood was coming from his nose. "Yes, I did enjoy that." Stepping over the prostrate old man she ordered, "get him upstairs." The woman climbed to the third floor. Her man grabbed the old man and roughly pushed him after her.

"Put him in the chair and keep an eye on him!" she ordered her man. The Professor was pushed into the chair.

"Hands where I can see them." The man instructed the Professor. The old man lay his hands on the tabletop. The woman's man stood near him and kept a continuous watch over him. He ignored the woman, but the Professor's eyes followed her around the room, not always easy as he had to twist his neck frequently. The man noted the old man's efforts and the constant hand

movement. The old man continually run his hands through each other. Or he pressed his nails into his palms. Or even seemed to press his nails into the wooden tabletop, sometimes. He was plainly anxious and did not know what was going to happen to him. The man liked that in a captive. The blood from his nose ran into the Professor's mouth, but he tried to ignore it; no one else was concerned.

The woman ignored both men. She knew what she was looking for and she wasted no time finding it.

"Oh! Professor!" she cried out in mock delight. "You have got them ready for me! And in a nice tidy pile too!" the sickly smile. "How kind of you." Then her voice turning to a snarl, "how stupid of you! You are a daft old fool!" she pushed a large stack of papers off the table. Then she carefully lifted her prize onto the table. "Did you think, perhaps, that I would not come back for these?" she laughed coldly. "It was always my intention to take these, when the time was right." The Professor merely grunted but his finger seemed to dig into the table in his frustration. The man smiled at his discomfort.

"And now for the plans." The woman walked over to the fireplace. The Professor's head slumped between his shoulders; one hand covered the other which was still nervously scratching at the table. The watching man enjoyed another nasty smile.

"Hello! Professor!" a young girl's voice suddenly cried out from below. The man moved quickly to the Professor and as the Professor snapped his head up the man thrust his gun into the side of his head.

"Nothing foolish, old man!" he said quietly into the Professor's ear. The woman was at the window. She made a signal then came to the head of the stairs. She glanced at the old man. He stared back at her. The Professor was thinking that she needed him alive. She could not afford to kill him yet. If he guessed right, then they intended to take him away. They had to force him to reveal the hiding place of the key. So, he could shout out to warn Collette, she could escape and raise the alarm. Of course, he did not know of the presence of the large man hidden in his back garden.

The woman seemed to guess the old man's thoughts. She moved quickly over to the Professor and slammed his face into the table. She hit him on the back of the head, and he went limp. She pulled his cardigan over his head.

"Make sure he makes no sound and be ready to move out." She rushed off down the stairs. The man was sure the old man was knocked out, he was unlikely to be making any sound soon. Nevertheless, the man used the cardigan to cover the Professor's face and stood ready to muffle any sounds he might make if he came 'round.

The woman had crept down to the kitchen door. She could see the tall teenager helping herself to cans of drink out of the fridge.

"Professor! It's Collette!" she shouted. "I've come for some cans." She was still unsettled by Jules' sudden appearance. It had seemed a good idea at the time for them to practice kissing. They had sworn each other to utter silence. Nobody else would know about it or find out about it. She was rather enjoying it too, Ed was not really her type and he was a friend, but it had been nice. Then bloody 'boffy' Jules had spoiled it all! The woman walked quietly around the kitchen table; she was trying to get to the back door. However, Collette suddenly straightened up, she had caught a stray reflection. She turned around.

"Who are you?" she asked the older woman facing her across the table.

"Where's the Professor?" she glanced into the hall.

"The Professor's upstairs." The woman answered and slowly started to make for the back door again. But something had flicked on in Collette's mind. She remembered the boys' description and how they had drooled over it. Reacting quickly, she threw the cans at the woman and ran for the back door. However, the woman had been ready for this. She ducked the cans and reached the door before the tall girl.

Collette backed off a step. Her parents had insisted she do Judo, Karate and a few other martial arts. She could do this, she thought. She grimaced and took a stance. The older woman sneered and laughed at her. It never occurred to Collette to scream out, or to run into the hall. The girl and woman circled each other cagily. Then Collette made a series of lunges at her opponent. But mock fighting in club was not the real thing; the woman was faster and stronger.

After Collette had been kicked and punched several times, she began to look for a way out. She was feeling dazed.

"Have you had enough?" the woman offered. Collette was uncertain.

"Thanks for the exercise, but I do not have time for this." The woman pulled a gun from one of her pockets and aimed it at Collette. The girl went rigid and her eyes widened madly as the woman pulled the trigger. Collette had expected a loud noise, but it did not happen. She did feel something hit her on her chest, just above her breasts. She looked down at a dart sticking out of her skin.

"Oh," she said weakly and then collapsed to the floor. The woman lifted the girl onto the table. She removed and pocketed the dart. But then she heard a hand on the back-door handle. Rosie thought she had heard scuffling sounds as she came under the wall, but she could see nothing until she got to the back door which was open. Then she saw a figure in black bending over Collette, who was laid out on the table. Collette was not moving. Before she could stop herself, her hand had pushed the handle. But she did manage to stop herself walking into the kitchen. The woman looked up at Rosie. She smiled. But Rosie recognised her immediately. She saw the scar. She did not hesitate. Rosie turned sharply and ran back towards the bolt hole. But she was stopped dead in her tracks by the sight of a large man standing in front of the brambles. He raised his arm, but Rosie had turned around. The woman was watching her with a sneer across her face. Then Rosie felt a prick on the back of her neck. She made to move her hand behind her head but crumpled to the floor.

"Bring her in here." The woman commanded the large man. She opened the back door wide. The large man started to drag Rosie by her feet.

"Lift her up!" the woman hissed at him. "Get the two of them into the Range Rover." The large man acknowledged her. "And tie them up and gag them!" the woman headed for the stairs. Soon after the Professor was carried out of the Lodge and placed in the vehicle by the other man. The woman carried the documents out in a bag brought from the vehicle. Very quietly the Range Rover pulled away down the road.

One pair of eyes had noticed its departure.

Chapter 12

Jules and Ed had been staring at each other for what felt like hours. It had been less than a minute. Their breathing was less laboured although Jules' hands were still shaking. Both their hearts pounded in their chests and a horrible empty feeling was in their guts. But Jules was now trying to think calmly. He and the Professor had planned for this only two days ago. What to do first? He had to check a few things. Why wouldn't his hands stop shaking? He held them out and willed them to become steady. Ed watched him. His own hands felt very jittery.

Ed had no idea what they could do. But it did seem that all the Professor's talk about deadly intrigue was not so far-fetched and now they were caught up in it. Worse, the girls were now victims of it. He was concerned about the old man - Ed quite liked him - too academic, obviously, but a decent bloke and he was very good to Jules. Ed appreciated that, especially as it had given him more breathing space from his best friend. Their relationship had benefited from that, these last couple of years. For the old man to be in trouble; well that was alright, he had been mixed up in this sort of thing all his life, probably. He must have known the risks and, to be fair to him, he had been warning Jules enough, lately. But the girls, now that was different. They were not part of all this. They did not even take anything the Professor, or Jules said, seriously. Ed had never been so worried or felt so helpless in his whole life.

"Come on Jules, think!" Ed urged him. "What can we do?" Jules was looking at him. "There has to be something. It's up to you. You are the only one who can do anything now. I'm no use." Jules heard the despair in his friend's voice. He realised that it was up to him and he needed to follow the procedure the Professor had drilled into him.

"You're right, Ed," Jules replied. "It is up to me now." Ed noticed his friend standing more upright, he had forced a grim smile onto his face. For the first time in his life Ed had to rely on his small, bullied friend, the friend he had constantly looked after. Seeing Jules steel himself made Ed feel more comfortable and it was very strange, but he knew that Jules was going to find something that would help them. Ed just knew it.

Jules searched the room and soon found that the pile of papers that dealt with the underground chamber was missing. He could not find a single sheet of paper concerning the chamber. Well, that confirmed one of the Professor's fears.

"Well, first thing," he told Ed. "I reckon it's our scar face woman."

"Sure?"

"I will be after this." Ed watched Jules walk into the fireplace. Jules tapped several times on a part of the brickwork. There was a noise and the stone draw popped out.

"Cool!" Ed moved closer. Jules pulled the draw out further and reached inside. It was empty. Even though it was clearly so, he rather frantically double checked, his hands scratching at the smooth stone.

"Well, that confirms ..." But he did not finish the sentence. The stair creaked loudly below, accompanied by a curse, hastily cut off. Both boys stared wildly at each other and then they panicked again, running into each other, pushing past each other, they moved further away from the top of the stairs. Reaching the back window, they realised, together, that there was nowhere good to hide. The curtains reached only just below the windowsill and their legs would show. Anyone trying to hide by crouching behind the table would be seen easily. The sound of someone coming closer, up the stairs, increased their desperation. Jules clawed at the window, but it was too late. Together they flattened themselves against the wall beside the fireplace. They might see the person before he saw them. But what they could do, they had no idea.

The boys were trying not to breathe.

Their hearts thumped under their rib cages.

Hands shook.

Jules was biting his lip.

Ed's teeth were clamped tightly together.

The person on the stairs had stopped just before the top. He must have heard their scrambling. They could hear his quiet breathing. He was obviously

assessing the situation. Jules and Ed could barely look. They tried to become part of the wall. Trying to merge with it.

Then they saw a gun slowly emerge. A hand slowly poked it out. A nervous hand. Then the arm followed. The arm swept the room. They could see the finger on the trigger. Then the rest of the man came into view.

"Dad!" Ed yelled beside Jules. He moved off the wall. "Dad!" Ed was shocked. Mr. Toper's slightly grubby looking face had turned, along with the gun, at the sound of his son. Sweat glistened heavily below his dyed dark hair.

"Ed! You're alright, son!" Mr. Toper gave them a huge smile. It distorted his thin, slightly wasted looking face. Father and son embraced rather clumsily. "Thank God you're alright, son. And you, Jules!" Mr. Toper gave Jules an affectionate pat on the shoulder. Ed was staring at the gun in his dad's hand.

"Wow, Dad! Where'd you get that?" Ed's eyes were shining.

"Oh, I've had this a few years." Mr. Toper's smile was turning to a grimace. "But I haven't had to get it out for a long time." He looked anxiously around the room. "You on your own, boys?" they nodded.

"No one else in the house?" the boys shook their heads.

"At least we don't think so." Jules said. Mr. Toper put his gun away. He was wearing a light jacket and the gun went into an inside pocket. Ed looked a little disappointed. Jules was still amazed at the unexpected appearance of Ed's dad. What was he doing here? Was he involved in some way? Was he a member of the 'Order'? The Professor had barely mentioned Mr. Toper. There

had never been any hint that he was part of this business. Ed was smiling proudly at his dad. Surprised, but proud amazement.

"They've got the Professor?" Mr. Toper moved towards the table.

"We think so," Jules answered.

"And they've got the girls too!" Ed added. Mr. Toper turned around very quickly. He stared at them in horror.

"The girls?!" he shook his head at them. "Not Collette and Rosie?!"

"Yeah!" Ed shouted.

"F***!" Mr. Toper swore loudly. "That's not good. That's not good at all!"

He was appalled. Then his face distorted again in dismay as Jules followed his gaze to the stone drawer still open in the grate.

"The secret drawer! It's open!" Ed's dad rushed over to it.

"Gone!" he exclaimed with annoyed desperation. "No revolver."

"No, it's gone." Jules confirmed. Ed stared at his friend curiously.

"Mind you I think the Professor had it in his cardigan pocket more, lately,"

Jules told them. "He was getting quite jittery."

"With good cause too, it seems." Mr. Toper turned to face Jules. Ed continued to stare at his friend. Jules felt the weight of his stare.

"What? What's the matter?" Jules asked him.

"You never told me about the revolver." He sounded disappointed. "The Professor had a gun?" Ed's dad nodded and grinned almost sadly at his son. "He was never intending to use it though, surely? He was not going to shoot anyone

with it. Was he?" Ed was thoroughly confused, his face incredulous. He looked from Jules to his dad for a sign it was not true.

"He was never slow to use it in the past," Ed's dad told them.

"I can't take all this in." Ed shook his head in disbelief. Mr. Toper ignored him as he looked back to Jules.

"More importantly," he began. "The plans are missing." Jules stared at him. Who the hell is Ed's dad? He thought once more. "Unless you know where they are Jules?"

"No. They've got them too, I think." Jules answered. "I can't find them anywhere." Ed was looking from his dad to his best friend.

"What are you talking about? What plans?" he demanded. They turned to look at him.

"What the hell's going on here?!" he shouted at them. There was a long pause where all three of them looked, almost suspiciously, at each other. Finally, Jules asked the question burning inside him.

"Who are you, Mr. Toper? Are you a member of the 'Order'?"

"No, Jules." He answered sadly. "I am not a member of 'The Order of Gilgamesh'."

"Gilgawhat?" Ed asked.

"Before I tell you more," he smiled weakly at his son. "Do you think you can find out where they've taken the Professor? And the girls of course." He asked Jules.

"We prepared a sign for this sort of thing." Jules replied. "I just have to find it." He tried not to sound desperate. "Do you think it was that woman?" Jules asked.

"Yeah, I saw them drive off." Mr. Toper replied. "Luckily, she does not know me."

"So, dad. What's the story?" Ed was ready for some answers.

Mr. Toper told his story. From time to time, as he spoke, he would glance at Jules. It felt to Jules as if he was checking to see if Jules was swallowing his story. Jules had the distinct feeling that the story was not entirely true. Ed clearly believed every word.

Ed's dad had been in the forces, the Marines. After he finished, he joined a special protection unit run by the government. They guarded important visitors, defectors, even royalty, he claimed.

"Wow! My dad was in the secret service!" Ed cried out.

"No. No. Not the secret service son." Mr. Toper denied it. This was one of those moments when Jules felt suspicious. Ed's dad had worked for the government for a few years and had met the Professor at that time. He heard about the 'Order' from someone else, Ed's mother. He had helped her, and they had become involved in a relationship. Slowly he became more and more involved with Ed's mother who was a member of the secret service. Her job was to keep an eye on the 'Order's' operations in this country. His employers were not happy and wanted Mr. Toper to break off contact with Ed's mother.

But they had a child instead, Edgar. Then while Ed was still a baby something went horribly wrong. An operation came unstuck and Ed's mum was killed. Ed had tears in his eyes, Jules could see them. He had never seen his friend like this before.

"Well, I went off the rails, I'm afraid." Mr. Toper explained. He was eventually sacked and thrown out of the protection unit. For a while he went missing in a perpetual drunken haze and he even forgot about Ed. He hung his head in shame at this point and could not look his son in the eye. But someone had taken care of Ed. It was someone from the 'Order'. He did not know who and they never revealed themselves. When a remaining friend from the unit was sure he was ready, Ed was returned to him and he was told to move into the terrace house. He was aware of the significance of the Lodge and the Professor and was given a watching brief in exchange he would have enough money to survive.

Jules could not help but think that his watching brief had slipped recently. But Ed's dad told him that he had reported the car and the occupants to his contact. They had been in touch with the Professor to offer any assistance. It had been politely refused. The feeling was that the Professor was deliberately allowing the situation to develop.

"It all has an endgame feel to it." Mr. Toper told them. "The extra work with you, Jules. The messages that he sent. He must have known they would be intercepted. Or worse, a traitor would reveal them to the enemies of the

'Order'. I think he was inviting some sort of reaction." Ed's dad looked at Jules very closely. "He was putting you in danger, Jules."

"I know that." Jules almost defiant, "he did not hide the seriousness of it from me." Jules shrugged and sighed. "I just didn't really believe it."

"You can say that again!" Ed agreed.

"Well, believe it now!" Mr. Toper walked to the table. "Whose blood do you reckon?"

"The Professor's," Ed showed his dad the bloody cardigan.

"I see," Mr. Toper could see the concern on the boys' faces. "I don't think any of them are in any real danger. Except perhaps the Professor," he added hastily. Jules frowned. "No, I think that they will threaten the girls to make the Professor tell them what they want to know. These people don't kill just for the sake of it. They like to keep everything quiet. No awkward stories in the press. Nothing to draw attention to their activities." He looked again at Jules.

"So, what do you think they are after Jules? It's got to be something to do with the old estate out there." He gestured to the window.

"Yes, the Professor told me he had just discovered the key. Or should I say the means to finding the key."

"The key to what?" Ed asked. He had been unnerved slightly by the common ground that his dad and his friend now seemed to be enjoying. He wanted to know as much as possible, now.

"You know the den?" Jules began.

"Yeah," Ed could not hide his impatience.

"Well, to cut a long story short, there's a hidden chamber underneath it."

"So. Has it got treasure in it, or something?" Ed was eager.

"Probably." Ed whistled softly.

"But it more likely contains the information to find other treasures, hidden around the world." Jules continued. Another whistle.

"So, why don't we just go and smash our way in and grab it all?" Ed sounded greedy. His dad smiled ruefully.

"It's never that easy, son." He spoilt his enthusiasm.

"No, apparently not." Jules agreed. "The Professor said the whole thing is booby trapped. If you do not do things right everything inside would be destroyed. The first thing you got to have is a key of some kind."

"But surely this chamber thing was built hundreds of years ago," Ed insisted.

"Those traps are not going to work still." He looked to his dad more than to Jules. Mr. Toper shrugged.

"Can we take the risk? I wouldn't let you near it right now. Obviously, the people who have the Professor and the girls believe it."

"Yeah, you'd better believe it, Ed," Jules assured him. "You should hear half the tales the Professor can tell!" no one spoke for a while.

"So, what do you know Jules?" Ed's dad now sounded more urgent. "What did the Professor tell you?"

"He said if he was snatched, he would try to leave a sign. He seemed to anticipate what they might do. But he would not tell me anymore. He was afraid that if they got me, they could find out from me." Jules sighed. "I don't think he trusted me that much."

"You're very wrong, Jules." Ed's dad said. He put one arm around the small lad. "From what I can tell he has never told any of his other pupils what he has told you. You are already well known in the 'Order', my sources tell me." He smiled encouragingly at Jules. Jules appreciated the support.

Jules reached for a tissue, "this is getting on my nerves!" he cleaned up the drying patch of blood.

"Look at this!" he shouted excitedly. Ed and his dad gathered round him.

"Look there! A sign!" Jules pointed to a fresh-looking mark on the tabletop. To Ed and his dad, it made no sense. It was just a funny scribble.

"Ed, see what the Professor has on his screen." Ed moved over to the computer set-up and moved the mouse.

"What is it?" Mr. Toper asked Jules.

"It's a symbol which stands for the letter 'p'." Jules told him.

"What language is that?"

"Oh, it's very old, Mr. Toper." For some reason Jules did not want to tell him it was in the first ever script.

"Looks like a file." Ed called to them. "Looks pretty boring to me. Sort of stuff you like Jules."

"Just press 'print' Ed." Let's see what comes out." His excitement was clear. The printer shuddered into life and Jules sat down at the table. Soon Ed presented Jules with the printed piece of paper. Mr. Toper had pulled a chair next to Jules, Ed stood over them.

"Take a pencil and paper," Jules instructed Ed's dad. "When you saw them leave, did you come straight into the Lodge?"

"No, not straight away. I went to get my gun and I had to make a call to report. I ran back. It was a few minutes after by then."

"That was probably when we were came into the house." Jules looked to Ed.

"So?" Ed asked him. "Your point being?"

"Well, she did not have time to check the Professor's computer. She got what she needed. The girls got in the way and they decided to take them and get out of here." Mr. Toper agreed with his reasoning. "She did not have time to look at this in detail."

"But it doesn't tell us anything," Ed said. "It looks, to me, like all the other files the Professor has."

"But this is one he prepared for me." Jules was confident. "Assuming she did not see it and the symbol is the right one, I think he would have left a different sign, otherwise. Assuming that, we'll try the obvious first, write the letters down as I say them Mr. Toper."

Jules then started counting letters as he moved his finger along the writing. When he had finished, Ed's dad had a series of letters written down.

"Still makes no sense." Ed said brutally.

"Oh, but it does! With a little prior knowledge!" Jules wrote the word:

MUSEUM

"But there's a letter 'b' left over." Ed announced.

"British Museum!" Mr. Toper shouted out. "That's it! They've taken them to the British Museum. That makes sense Jules. Doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does. The Professor told me that some treasures were safer in the museums."

Mr. Toper got to his feet, checked his watch. "We've got some time at least." Ed and Jules looked at him doubtfully.

"What do you mean dad?"

"Well, they're hardly going to march into the British Museum with three captives, guns in hand. Are they?" the boys shook their heads slowly.

"So, that means that they will have to go in after it's all closed down for the night." The boys were still not with him. "So, it gives us time to get to London!"

"Alright!" Ed understood.

"I got you!" Jules nodded.

"But how are we going to get to London in time?" Ed asked. "We got no car or anything."

"Yes, well, I'm going to have to nick one, I think." Ed's dad told them.

"Shit! Dad! Can you do that?"

"Of course, I can, son." He seemed quite proud of his ability.

"Now you wait here, and I'll get the motor." He was about to leave. Ed and Jules looked quickly at each other. They were thinking the same thing.

"Hang on Dad!" Ed looked a little angry. "You're not thinking of leaving us behind, are you?" it was clear he was! "No! No! No! We're coming to. They're our friends! We want to help!" the boys moved together towards the man. Mr. Toper hesitated. He looked at the boys, weighing them up.

"We'll get there anyway. We'll find a way." Jules was quietly determined.

"This is going to be dangerous boys."

"It's a bit late for all that." Jules told him. "If they succeed then they will have to come back here. We'll be waiting anyway."

"Come on Dad! We can help. You might need Jules if anything happens to the Professor." Ed implored him.

"OK!" Mr. Toper gave in. "But I think we can't leave the Lodge with no one here." He thought for a while. "Perhaps your mother, Jules?"

"No way! I'm not dragging mum into all this." Jules was shocked at the suggestion. "Anyway, she's busy ... Ah ... Working today."

"Oh, I see." There was an awkward silence.

"I know what to do." Jules told them.

"Really?" Mr. Toper looked hopefully at him. "The Professor told me what to do. I make a call and say the passwords. Someone will come."

"OK, you do that, I'll get a car."

"I'll come with you," Ed told him.

"No, Ed. Stay here. You'll just slow me down." Ed stared at his dad.

"If you don't come back for us. I'll never forgive you." Ed's voice was firm.

Jules felt the tension between father and son. They held each other's eyes. The moment seemed to last forever. Mr. Toper broke first.

"Just be ready when I come back."

"Shouldn't we ring the girls' parents?" Jules suddenly thought out loud.

"Hell! No!" Ed's dad shouted at him. "It's complicated enough as it is. I'll ring my contact and tell him what's happening. We are going to need some help when we get there. He can take care of the girls' parents."

"What about my mum?" Jules remembered, but Ed's dad had gone.

"They'll have to look after her too, Jules." Ed assured him. "Make that call."

Jules picked up the Professor's phone. He had the number memorised and dialed it. The phone rang many times. Jules stared at Ed and raised an eyebrow. Then finally a male voice answered.

"Yes?"

"Now I will pray to the great gods." Jules said into the phone. There was a gasp the other end. A few seconds passed.

"For my friend had an ominous dream." The voice replied. There was another pause.

"Once I ran for you." The voice added.

"For the water of life," Jules responded.

"And I now have nothing." There was another pause.

"They've got the Professor. The Lodge needs someone."

"I understand. Are you the boy, Jules?"

"Yes."

"Who's got the Professor?"

"We suspect the scar faced woman."

"I see. Where have they taken him?"

"British Museum. We're going after them."

"No! Do not do that! Wait for us!"

"Just get someone here fast!" Jules put the phone down.

"It's a joke, isn't it?" Ed laughed.

"I wish it was, Ed. I wish it was."

"Yeah." Ed's worried look returned. They went downstairs, and Jules bolted the back door. Inside the Lodge entrance they waited for Ed's dad.

Chapter 13

The black Range Rover was parked up in a Bloomsbury side street. The large man was at the wheel, the other man was beside him. Behind them the scar faced woman sat with many papers sprawled around her. The three captives had been slung roughly into the back. They were still unconscious. During the journey the woman had spoken only to remind the driver to stay under the limit. It would plainly not do to attract the attention of the Police when there were three drugged people in the back. Otherwise she worked on the papers: there were some she had not seen before, however, many of them she had seen copies of previously. Sometimes she had stolen them herself. The woman had considerable knowledge; she had been trained by the Professor originally. But when that relationship broke down in acrimony, she had continued her education elsewhere. She was not in the same league as the Professor. Who was? She thought with a wry smile. But she had gleaned a lot from the unseen papers. All it needed was to twist the old man's arm and she would have the key. Fate had presented them with the perfect means to do that. She chuckled quietly to herself.

In front the large man noticed the woman was amused by something.

"Something amusing you?" he asked her. He had a soft American accent. His name was Roy, originally trained by the American Rangers, he had done some mercenary work in Africa. For the last couple of years, he had worked for

a very wealthy American Businessman. He assisted with security in general. Specifically, he led a team of similarly qualified personnel, their principal job was to obtain whatever their patron desired; this could be anything from industrial secrets to the services of a lady. More recently he had been working with the woman to seize ancient treasures for his boss' private collection.

"I was just thinking, Roy," the woman had an almost 'clean' English accent. From a dossier collected on her, he had read about a Swiss finishing school. Degrees in Archaeology and Anthropology from the Sorbonne. "What a perfect coincidence it is." She glanced at his reflection in the mirror. "These young people falling into our hands like this." She chuckled softly again. The man agreed with a smile and a nod. He had learnt that the woman could be very single-minded. She was tough and often cruel. She usually managed to obtain their target. Only the efforts of the 'Order' had thwarted her in their time working together. They hated her because she had once been one of their own, but she had gone over to the 'dark side' of commercial gain. He called her Suzi scar face; but not to her face. She knew what she was called by others but was distinctly unimpressed if they dared to say it aloud.

"They are not going to wake up soon, are they?" the other man asked her. He was a sound operator who she often used for jobs in Britain. He was named Dennis; Roy had not worked with him before. But they had got on well. Dennis had performed certain functions for various London gangs and was admired by many in those circles. Oddly, he seemed to have very few enemies

and for his part, Dennis enjoyed this ancient relic work. He hoped to keep his association with the beautiful, but cold Suzi.

"No." Suzi replied. Dennis noted how she absent-mindedly stroked her scar. "They might twitch a bit, soon. I will need to bring them round when the time comes. When we are inside the museum." She looked over to the girls and the Professor. They would be a little groggy to begin with, but otherwise fine. Judging by the last pieces of information she had just acquired. She thought that it was very likely that they could leave them in the museum, afterwards. This assumed that the Professor would be a 'good boy' and provide them with the key. She might have to get rough with him and she realised that she was looking forward to it and she was prepared to use the girls. She would hurt them if necessary. This job was very important. It was more important to her than her employer realised as she intended to get much more from it. More than the odd item she would turn over to Roy to keep his boss happy. It was the knowledge she was after. The knowledge to find more treasures. However, it was not a job worth killing for. The chamber was not going anywhere, and she would find other ways in the future, if necessary.

Yet, as the woman glanced once again at the old man, she knew he would not risk the girls. She checked her watch. It was getting dark outside. Soon their people would be in position.

"Roy? Have you got the radio ready on the right frequency?" she asked him.

"Yes. All ready." Roy watched her in the mirror.

"In the next hour they should be moving into position." She reminded him. Dennis checked his watch. She collected the papers and made a pile of them on the floor, then she settled back to wait.

It was close to midnight when the radio suddenly crackled into life. The three of them were professionals and were determined not to appear concerned. But it was taking longer than planned and the woman had begun to check the three in the back more regularly.

"This is Mummy. All clear. I repeat all clear." The voice at the other end was calm.

"This is Daddy. Message received. Stand by." Roy glanced once in his mirror. Suzi nodded. Roy started the engine and pulled off. Very soon he was driving down one side of the Museum Building and then into a delivery entrance. The gate was held open for them and the Range Rover disappeared into a loading bay. A heavy shutter was pulled down behind them as lights came on all around them. Roy cut the engine and switched the vehicle's lights off. Dennis got out and walked to the back of the Range Rover while Suzi got out and walked up to one of the Museum guards waiting for them

"Any problems?" Suzi asked him.

"Just one." The guard sounded uncomfortable. "The Doctor got a visit from one of the 'Order' before we could make a move. It took him a while to shake him off. When he left, we took the place of the guards without a problem.

They were all darted and are now tied up in one of the anterooms on the ground floor."

"Good work." Suzi fitted a radio link up to herself. "Help to take the captives downstairs." The guard nodded and went to help Dennis and Roy at the back of the Range Rover.

"Doctor Yonder, where are you?" Suzi asked her headset as she walked out of the loading bay area.

"Hello, Suzi. I am in my office. We have had a visit from the 'Order'. I am just putting out a few fires." The voice seemed almost diffident. But Suzi knew the Doctor. He was a smarmy, patronising, lying bastard whose rise through the ranks of academe had been mainly on the backs of gifted students. He had reached the exalted position at the Museum with very little examination of his abilities. But now he was coming under closer revue and he was running out of gullible young students to do the hard work for him. Being a member of the 'Order' had helped him, it had cushioned him from the most vitriolic criticism. But the wolves were now gathering, and they would soon bring him down. Then some truth and clarity would be restored to a few careers; their value would be appreciated, fully, at last. Who better for her to work with? A desperate failed man searching for monetary salvation.

"I trust we will not be disturbed again tonight, Doctor." Suzi put her 'quiet menace' voice on.

"No, we will not." The Doctor tried to sound convincing. Suzi smiled.

"Meet me downstairs in the Sumerian section. We will need to take a closer look at the 'Shamash tablet'. Bring it with you if it is not currently on display."

"Really?" the Doctor was surprised. The 'Shamash tablet' was one of their best-preserved Sumerian tablets. It had been excavated very early on. No record of the discoverers remained. It had been donated to the Museum by a very high-ranking family in the early 1800's and it was priceless; a veritable treasure of the Museum.

"We are going to be careful with it, are we not?" the Doctor was worried. Suzi laughed at him.

"We will do whatever we have to, Doctor." She said ruthlessly. "Get a move on, Doctor!" she chided him. Suzi made her way down to the Sumerian section. She passed many different displays, but only the low-level night security lights were on and little could be seen. The three captives were carried by the guard, Roy and Dennis. When they reached the correct place, the men put the captives gently on the floor.

"Find three chairs and tie them into them. Put the old man here and the girls opposite, there." She indicated as she spoke. The men disappeared into a side room. They returned with the chairs and very soon the captives were bound to the chairs. The woman produced a small thin black case. She drew a needle from it and carefully injected the Professor. Then without waiting to see the effect, she repeated her actions with the girls. Afterwards, she put the needle back in the case and closed it, leaving it on a nearby table. She then walked to

the wall and adjusted the lighting in the room. A pool of light illuminated the three captives, who were showing signs of coming 'round.

Rosie was the first to regain consciousness. She opened her eyes to find a watery blur obscuring her sight. Her head hurt. Instinctively she shook it, hoping that somehow it would help clear it. Then she discovered that something was covering her mouth and jammed in between her teeth. She tried to move her hands to pull the thing out of her mouth. Then she realised that her hands were tied to the chair she was sat in. She struggled against her bindings, but it was painful. Her wrists were very sore and marked red from the plastic bindings; also, her legs had been tied to the chair. Her eyes had cleared, she looked about her, twisting her head.

Next to her she could see that Collette was in the same predicament as she was. She seemed to be coming 'round too. Rosie watched her friend go through a similarly painful few minutes of discovery. Eventually their eyes met, and they communicated as much as they could with frantic eye movements and shakes of their heads. Finally, they realised that the Professor was only a few yards in front of them, he was trussed up as well; he had not come 'round yet. They could see no one else, except a black figure which looked like a woman. She had her back to them, studying a display cabinet. There were other cabinets on either side, and they all contained lumps of flat rock. The girls noticed that the rocks had funny writing on them, the funny writing that Jules and the Professor were so into.

"The old man's a bit slow coming round." A sudden voice from behind, startled the girls; they 'jumped' in their chairs. The woman turned and they recognised the scar. Rosie and Collette screwed their eyes up at each other - they would like to bash her!

"He is getting on a bit." The woman said quite cheerfully. She walked over to the Professor, lifted an eyelid and gently slapped the old man's cheeks.

"Come on, Professor," she cooed in his ear. "Come on, now. Wake up. There's work to be done." The Professor slowly became more aware of his circumstances. He appeared less troubled by the bindings. But his face snarled when he saw the woman. No sound escaped his gag, but the girls had a pretty good idea what he had tried to say. They agreed. However, when he saw the girls for the first time, his face changed. It was now filled with fear and uncertainty.

"Good. That's better." The woman was happy with him. As if he was a small child doing as it was told. Footsteps approached. The Professor and the girls strained to see who it was but could see little as the lights shone brightly in their eyes. The woman turned and spoke.

"Doctor, get the case open." She indicated the guard. He stepped into the light. "Are the security systems off?"

"Yes. Everything's down except the cameras. A team is watching them."

"Good." The Doctor was fumbling with a key. "Never mind that, Doctor. Stand aside," she ordered him, somewhat impatiently. Pulling the Professor's

revolver from a pocket, she used it to smash the case open, violently and noisily. The girls squirmed slightly as the glass flew; too theatrical, thought the Professor, not for the first time. But he was not stupid and saw the significance of Suzi's demolition job. She was not afraid of being disturbed. She was in control of the situation and he was meant to realise that.

"Bring the tablet before the Professor." She told the Doctor, stepping over the broken glass. She bent down and looked closely at the Professor's eyes. He was ready. Good. She gave him a heavy slap across the face. He had been expecting something and so his face moved little. She looked annoyed for an instant. Then the sickly smile returned, and she hit him right on the nose. It immediately started to bleed again. The Professor's head jolted back under a few more blows.

"I do feel better." She smiled sickly at him. She noticed that the Doctor had stopped just inside the light. He was staring at the girls. The girls had rocked in anger at the woman punching the old man. Dennis stepped closer to them and steadied their chairs putting a hand on each of their shoulders, he bent his head between them.

"Be good, pretty girls, now." He squeezed their shoulders gently as he said the word 'pretty'. The girls became very uncomfortable. They could feel his warm breath as he looked at them in turn. He was not just gazing at their faces either, they noticed. Both girls got that empty feeling in their stomachs. They

went very still while Dennis grinned and stood back. But his hands remained on their shoulders.

"Problem, Doctor!" Suzi barked at him. He quickly looked back to her.

"What are they doing here?" he was not happy.

"They are insurance, Doctor. Do not concern yourself with them. Come here and gloat over your rival." Suzi's voice was enticing. He moved over to the old man and he held the tablet where the Professor could clearly see it. Also, he could clearly see him.

"Professor Keble, how nice to see you once more." He smirked deliberately. "Hopefully for the last time!" there was bitterness now. The Professor struggled to say something. But he remained calm. He had long suspected Yonder was a fraud; he knew there was no depth to his knowledge. He had not been keen on his admission to the 'Order' as he felt he was a dishonourable man. So, it was no real surprise to see him mixed up with Suzi. The woman made a gesture to someone behind him. The large man reached over him and took his gag off. The Professor worked his mouth, then after one failed attempt he managed to say something.

"Yonder! You are a fraud and a charlatan!" it sounded pompous. But it was all he could think off at that moment. Suzi and Yonder burst out laughing.

"You are in league with the devil!" he shouted at him. "She will sell all knowledge to the highest bidders. A darker world is her aim!" he finished.

They were laughing so much at him, and he could feel the pressure of the large man's hands on his shoulders.

But the woman suddenly put her finger to one ear. She was getting a message. She stopped laughing, turned to the guard.

"Deal with it!" she spat out the order. He nodded. He had heard the message too. "I suggest you lose them in the building, somewhere," she said to him as he hurried away.

"Well, an unfortunate development, Professor, means I must move my plans forward." The Professor could tell she had been taken by surprise. He could only hope that maybe help was at hand. He would have to delay her as much as he could.

"What is it?" Yonder asked her, a hint of panic creeping into his voice. "Nothing to worry about, Doctor." She smiled coldly. "Now hold the tablet up for the Professor to study." Yonder did this with shaking hands; the clay tablet was quite heavy anyway.

"I have no time for foolishness." She told the Professor sternly. "Tell me the hidden meaning in this tablet." She watched the old man's reaction.

Defiance. He said nothing.

"Or I shall hurt one of the girls," she continued.

The old man's eyes narrowed. A little uncertainty.

Then the return of defiance.

He spoke, "even you would not sink that low, Suzi. You are a monster. But are you that desperate and despicable?" as he said this, he knew the answer. He could tell from her cold, dark eyes. They were so attractive when a spark lit them up, but now they were empty black pits. Beside her the weakling Yonder giggled nervously and eyed Suzi fearfully.

Suzi said nothing. She walked over to Rosie and smiled down at the young girl. Pretty thing, she thought, in a very compact sort of way. She reached for one of the girl's fingers. Rosie tried to struggle but Dennis held her down firmly. Rosie's head thrashed about. She looked wildly at Collette, who was also trying to get out of her bindings. Collette's chair was rocking.

"I shall break one of her fingers to start with." Suzi did not turn around. She spoke firmly. The Professor hoped she did not mean it. But he could not take the chance. The poor girl was terrified, this was not her fight. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. This big secret, the key, was it worth it? Jules had said that they could still get by without it. They could follow Suzi; use her tactics.

The snap of the girl's finger was clearly heard. The howl of agony from the girl barely muffled by the gag. The Professor was shocked out of his deliberations. He could see the poor girl's disfigured digit: it stood up at an improbable angle. The girl's face had turned white. She was passing out. The other girl looked at him in utter horror and beneath her gag she was screaming.

"Alright! No more!" the Professor yelled out.

"Good!" Suzi was back in front of him. She stabbed at the tablet with a finger. "Explain!"

"I think it is a typical 'Order of Gilgamesh' code." He began. He was a little out of breath.

"You mean take every fifth letter?" Suzi asked him as she studied the tablet.

"No, a different code to that." He realised that she was not aware of this code - another bad thing about this affair, she was now going to know another secret 'Order' code.

"Take multiples of five. Start with the first letter as zero. Then count five. Then count ten, then fifteen, and so on." He hoped help was near as he looked desperately into the surrounding darkness. The girl Rosie had fainted. Her head had rolled forward onto her chest. Collette had calmed down and now stared curiously at him. He tried to smile encouragingly at her, but it came out all too grim.

Suzi and Yonder pored over the tablet, checking each other. Then finally Suzi shouted out triumphantly, "Look inside!" Yonder laughed, slightly hysterically. They were both very pleased with themselves.

"Look inside what?" Yonder said to her. "Inside what?" he was a little panicky once more. Suzi looked to the Professor. It was clear to him that the tablet was a fake. It must have been put together by the 'Order' many years ago. Probably at the time the chamber was created, and it had held its secret safe until now.

Suzi read the old man's thoughts. He could not hide them in time.

"Give me the tablet." She ordered Yonder.

"Why? What are you going to do with it?" he was suspicious of her.

"Give me the tablet, Doctor." Her voice filled with quiet menace. Yonder shivered, but he clutched the tablet to his chest.

"You're not touching it! It's priceless!" he cried out. The Professor caught a movement over his shoulder. Yonder saw it and cringed.

"No! Don't!" he cowered before them.

Sudden laughter caused them all to look round. Yonder saw a smallish, rounded boy walk into the light, his slightly freckly face was smiling. He had brown hair, curled slightly at the ends.

"I think you'll find that tablet is an 'Order of Gilgamesh' fake." Jules informed the quivering man holding the tablet.

"What?! Never?!" he looked aghast at the boy. "It has been here for hundreds of years."

This time the Professor laughed. "How ironic that you now try to be honourable, Yonder. When you clutch in your hand one of the best fakes ever made!" he laughed again. But his eyes were trying to make eye-to-eye contact Jules. But the boy was ignoring him.

Suzi snatched the tablet from Yonder's weakened grasp. She held it up and looked at it more closely.

"Smash it," Jules told her, "take the key and leave my friends here." She considered the boy for a moment. Then she hurled the tablet to the floor. It broke in a hundred pieces or more with a loud crash. The pieces bounced off the floor. Then Suzi spotted the metallic shape and reached down for it.

"I have it!" she turned to the boy, "get the boy!" she ordered. But Jules had slipped back into the surrounding darkness.

Chapter 14

The boys had some doubts. They waited for Ed's dad. The minutes went by. He did not return - they went through a few tapping and pacing phases.

"He's probably had to go a fair distance away," Ed offered hopefully. "You know, to get a decent car." Jules merely nodded. He was thinking what they could do if Mr. Toper did 'a runner'. How could they get to London? Where could they get enough money from? If they did, what could they do anyway? Would they be too late? Would it not be better to wait here and jump them when they returned? These and other thoughts were racing around his mind.

"He's there!" Ed yelled out. He had stepped into the road to look both ways. Jules came running out of the Lodge entrance. Ed was pointing towards his house where a red car was parked outside.

"I saw him go in the house." Ed assured his friend. "Must be getting something." He thought for a second or two. "Hey! Maybe it's more guns Jules, one for each of us!" Ed's excitement was running away with him.

"What do I want a gun for?" Jules frowned. "Do you want to shoot someone Ed?" Ed looked a little uncomfortable, at first, with this question. But he rallied.

"If it's them or us, Jules? What are you going to do?" there was a short silence while the boys absorbed the significance of his words. Ed was looking intensely at Jules.

"It's us, Ed." Jules said quietly. But he could not believe they were talking like this! They were not even in Year 11 yet! Ed was satisfied with his friend's answer. He looked back up the road to his house.

"Of course, he could just get back in the car, turn around and drive off before we could reach him." Ed spoke his worry out loud.

"We can't run up there in time. If he saw us coming, he could still drive off." Jules could not see anything for it, but to trust Mr. Toper to come for them.

"We'll just have to trust him, Ed." Ed, at that moment, looked as if this was a hard thing for him to accept.

"Here he comes. Getting in the car." Ed gave a running commentary, even though Jules could clearly see. "Starting the car. Heading back to us! Yes!" Ed punched the air in joy. Jules was pleased too. Now he could let Mr. Toper do the thinking.

"Just picked some more things up from the house." Ed's dad told them as the car stopped and he opened the doors for them. Ed got in the front seat while Jules got in the back.

"More guns, Dad?" Ed could not contain his desire.

"No! Son." Mr. Toper looked a little disappointed. "I've got some rolls, drinks and two jackets for you to wear if it gets cold later." He turned in his seat, "I got an old one of Ed's for you Jules. It's probably too big, but ..." He turned back. He started to drive down the road being careful not to attract any attention to them.

"Where did you get the car, Dad?"

"Don't ask son. Best you don't know. But hopefully it won't be missed for a few hours. Should get us to London in time." He glanced at his son. He could see he was a little glum. "I did bring something for you, Ed."

"Yeah! What Dad?" Ed perked up and looked around hopefully.

"Here they are." Jules could not see what Mr. Toper passed to Ed. But telling by the big grin that now lit up Ed's face, it was something he appreciated, a lot.

"Thanks, Dad."

"Be careful, you know, don't you?"

"Sure, Dad."

"Keep them hidden. Only use them if you have to."

"Right, Dad." Mr. Toper watched Jules in the mirror. He did not seem to be taking any interest in them. Jules stared out the window while in his hands he held the Professor's night glasses. He was wondering what they were going to do when they got there. He could not stop himself seeing the three of them being tortured.

"The British Museum, Jules, is that in Kensington?" Ed's dad was asking him. He thought for a second.

"No. It's Bloomsbury." Jules informed him.

"North of the river." Mr. Toper said, more to himself.

They spoke very little during the journey. As they began to make their way through north London a mobile rang. It belonged to Mr. Toper. He gave a brief answer estimating how long it would be till they arrived. Then, quite suddenly, Jules could see the signs for the Museum. He became more alert and gazed avidly out of the window, half-expecting to see the woman leading their friends down the street, chained together like slaves. They would jump out and rescue them. It would be as easy as that.

Ed was also searching keenly. It was dark now and the streetlights would not allow him to see into the deepest shadows. Ed was also thinking of the scar faced woman. But he was having trouble getting past her half open bulging black top. He shook his head to banish such thoughts and felt a little ashamed of himself.

Mr. Toper was also alert. He drove completely around the Museum, a couple of times. He drove as slowly as the other traffic would allow him while he also scanned all the entrances and watched for some signal. After the second circuit he found a parking place. They sat in the car and waited. The front entrance of the Museum was clearly visible, it was well lit. There were few other lights that they could see. Some uniformed guards could be seen occasionally.

Mr. Toper was watching the people on the pavement closely. After about ten minutes he noticed a man standing twenty yards away. He appeared to be looking in a bright shop window. Mr. Toper flashed the headlights once. The

man turned slightly to see where the sudden illumination had come from. His attention returned to the window. The boys watched as he began to reach into his pockets.

"Wait here, boys!" Mr. Toper got out of the car quickly. He approached the man. To the boys it looked as if Ed's dad was 'bumming a fag' and a light off the bloke who was smaller than Mr. Toper. He gave a fag to Ed's dad and offered a light from a lighter. Ed's dad bent his head and took the light. Jules noted that he instantly took the lit fag from his mouth. He did not put it back. They seemed to chat for a minute, then the man followed Mr. Toper back to the car. He got in alongside Jules.

"This is Bill." Ed's dad introduced him, and the boys smiled at the man.

"Hello, boys." Bill acknowledged them. Ed was thinking that this man could be Jules when he's older. He did not look much taller than Jules and he had the same sort of build. Ed had a feeling his friend was going to grow more outwards than upwards in the future. This bloke was virtually bald though. Would Jules go bald? He tried to catch his friend's eye but was soon distracted by the men talking. Jules was thinking, for some reason that he could not understand why, that it was probably not unusual, here, for one man to lead another man to a car with two young boys inside.

"Toper, I'm going out on a limb for you here." Bill shook his head doubtfully. "I've been watching for an hour now. And I've seen nothing."

"Nothing?" Mr. Toper pressed him. "Nothing at all, Bill?"

"Well there was a bit of activity twenty minutes ago. Someone left. Then there seemed to be quite a few guards around for a few minutes after that. Like they were having a change of the guard, or something." He shrugged. "Best I can do you, Toper."

Jules could see that Ed's dad had decided what to do. He must have been considering it on the way here.

"Right. Here's what we do." He looked from one person to the next. "We send the boys in."

"Be serious, Toper!" Bill said. "What do you expect the boys to do?"

"Smoke them out Bill!" Jules could see the excitement in Mr. Toper's eyes. "They just go straight up there and create a right to do. Boys, you bang on the doors and windows. Keep shouting about your missing friends. Don't leave. Stay there."

"What good will that do, Toper?" Bill was unsure.

"Well, don't you see. If they are the real guards, they won't want to let the boys in. They'll call the Police. It's very unlikely they'll let the boys in, but if they do, we're in."

Bill was not convinced.

"But if they are not the real thing." Ed's dad paused. "Then I'm guessing that they will want to get the boys off the street. Make sure they don't cause a scene that pulls more people over. They'll take the boys in and ... probably tie them up. With the others I expect."

"What do we do then?" Bill, still not sure.

"Well, we break in and come to the rescue." Mr. Toper smiled. "Oh, and you'll have to call for back-up too. Of course." Bill was wavering.

"Look Bill, we have the night glasses and we can put trackers on the boys. Let's do it! For all times sake!" Bill shook his head slowly. However, his face was erupting into a huge smile.

"OK, Toper. I reckon the worst I'll get is a few hours in a Police station explaining it all. Ed and his dad both shouted, "alright!" Jules could not stop himself. He clapped. Twice. But he thought he got away with it.

Mr. Toper and Bill went through some instructions with the boys. They put the electronic trackers inside their clothing. Ed's dad gave him some extra ones and told him to put them on the others, in case something went wrong, and they had to keep track of them. Then they were ready.

The boys got out of the car. They put the jackets on. Ed's fitted fine, obviously, but Jules' jacket was about three sizes too big. He looked quite comical as they walked up to the Museum entrance.

"Scared?" Ed asked him out of the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah."

"Me too." Jules looked at him. Ed smiled very grimly at Jules. "I'm just thinking of the girls. You don't know what they'll do to them." He grimaced.

"They'll be alright, Ed. The Professor won't let anything bad happen to them.

"I hope you're right, Jules. I hope you're right."

They had reached the doors. Ed started banging on them with all his might. He began shouting at the top of his voice. Jules joined him. The guards at the front desk seemed taken by surprise.

Inside the car the two men followed the boys' progress with the night glasses Bill had brought. They smiled to see some passers-by stop to take notice of the boys' actions. They saw the guards talking to the boys through the door. They spotted one of them, further inside, making contact with someone over a headset. The command was given. The doors opened, and the boys were ushered inside.

"See that Bill!" See the guns!" Mr. Toper shouted out to Bill.

"I see them, Toper."

"When have you ever heard of Museum guards having guns?" Mr. Toper was sure Bill would be convinced now. He was. Bill was on his mobile. They got out of the car and walked quickly to the Museum railings. Bill held the tracking device in one of his hands.

"They're moving along the corridor." Mr. Toper was watching. "Out of sight now." His voice was anxious.

"I've got them." Bill told him. He started to walk along the pavement. They moved down the side of the building. Bill was careful, to watch where he was going, and to keep the lads' traces on the tracker screen. Mr. Toper was less

careful as he walked with most of his attention on the building, he was looking for a good place to break-in.

"Got it!" He told Bill. He immediately climbed over the railings. Bill followed him. They ignored any comments made by the public; there were few. Bill made another call while Mr. Toper broke in through a ground floor window. There was no alarm and they looked knowingly at each other.

"They'll be at the front in minutes." Bill said and put his mobile away. He followed Toper through the window.

Jules was not sure who the better actors were, Ed and himself, or the guards. The guards were talking to each other on headsets as they went through a believable charade of considering the boys' claims. They faked an argument about what to do. Then a head guard arrived and listened to everything again. Ed and Jules were the image of panic-stricken friends, convinced of imminent danger. Eventually the head guard agreed to take them on a tour of the Museum so that they could see for themselves. Another guard went with them.

The guards went in front. The boys could clearly see the outline of guns under their uniforms. They shared a worried look and Jules gulped for air.

"Alright back there?" one of the guards called to them. He obviously found it all very amusing.

"Yes, thanks." Jules answered quickly.

"Actually, no." Ed said beside him. Jules looked at him. The guards stopped and turned to face the boys.

"What's the matter?" the amused one asked Ed.

"Well, I need to go to the loo," Ed sounded apologetic and embarrassed. "It's all this excitement I think." He looked like he wanted a hole to open in front of him and swallow him up. Jules tried to look like he was dying to laugh. He looked the other way while the two guards smiled at Ed.

"Here's one." The amused one pointed out the toilet nearby. "Take your time." He called after Ed as he pushed the door open. The guards looked at Jules. The boy was not very big, but the oversized jacket he wore swamped him and made him look almost dwarfish. They did not hide their smirks. Jules shrugged his shoulders, or at least that was what it looked like under the huge jacket.

"It's my friends," Jules indicated the toilet. They nodded. "It was the first thing I grabbed. We were in a hurry." He tried to explain. They smirked an acceptance of his story. Then a crashing sound came from the toilet. Jules swung round quickly.

"What was that?" the other guard spoke. Jules gave another unnatural shrug, but he kept his eyes on the toilet door.

"I'll go see. He might have fallen down, or something." The guard told the other one. He pushed through the door.

Inside he could see a line of urinals along the wall with cubicles and sinks the other side. Ahead the last wall was mostly frosted glass windows set in the wall. One of the windows was open and moving slightly. He rushed over to it

and looked out into a courtyard. Ed opened the nearest cubicle door. The guard sensed the movement and started to turn. But he never fully completed the turn. Ed had zapped him with thousands of volts from a hand-held device his dad had given him in the car.

The guard slumped to the floor, Ed left him and rushed over to the door, as he ran, he yelled out.

"Quick! Come quick! There's been an accident!" he waited on his knees the other side of the door, a door's width away.

Outside Jules looked horrified at the remaining guard, who, no longer amused, was not smiling any more. Jules made to run into the toilet, but the guard pulled him back and then he roughly pushed Jules across the corridor - Jules had trouble staying on his feet.

"Wait there! Do not move!" the guard ordered him. He pulled his gun out and moved to the door, keeping an eye on Jules he listened at the door. But he heard nothing. He shoved the door open with all his strength and it banged against the wall. Ed lunged forward, diving onto the floor below the guard he reached out and zapped him with the device. Jules saw the guard's body convulse, then he fell to the floor with a thump.

Ed got to his feet. He looked a little wide-eyed, Jules thought.

"How did you do that?" Jules asked, impressed. Ed showed him the device.

"Dad gave me it in the car." He explained.

"Aren't they illegal?" Jules frowned. "Where'd you get it?"

"Off the internet." He smiled at Jules. "Where do you think we should look for them." Ed stepped over the guard's body. Jules looked at the information on the wall.

"This is where we need to go," Jules pointed.

"Sumerian section." Ed read out loud. "You sure?"

"Yes." Jules dropped the oversized jacket on top of the guard. "You don't want it do you?"

"Nah. Leave it." They set off down the dimly lit corridor.

"They underestimated us." Ed said.

"Yes." Jules agreed. "Will they next time, I wonder?" he had the Professor's night glasses in his hands. He put them on. Ahead he could see another guard rushing along the corridor towards them. The guard was not paying much attention, he seemed to be having trouble with his ear. Jules realised he was trying to contact the other guards.

"We've got company," Jules whispered to Ed.

"I can hear him." Ed replied. "There's nowhere good to hide in this corridor," he assessed.

"What shall we do?" Jules could see the man still had not spotted them.

"The direct approach, I think." Ed said. "They still don't suspect us." He started running down the corridor, shouting for attention. Jules followed him. Before they reached the man, who had now stopped, eyeing them suspiciously, with one hand holding a gun, Ed stopped running and bent double. He was

quite plainly out of breath and apparently exhausted. Jules carried on past him and stopped a few yards in front of the guard. Breathlessly he urged the man, "quick there's been an accident. Or worse! Some of your men are collapsed up the corridor, here." He beckoned the guard and started to move backwards. The guard was wary, he kept speaking into his headset.

"Come on! I think they're badly hurt!" Jules did not wait for him, he set off back down the corridor. As he passed Ed, he tried to get him to follow. Ed ran a few steps but then stopped, bent double once more. The guard slowly moved after the boy. As he approached the bigger lad, the lad's body was racked by a series of coughs. The smaller lad was almost out of sight - Jules had got to the spot where he had left the night glasses - the guard quickened his pace. He thought the big lad had tripped him, but then the volts took his consciousness.

Jules ran back down the corridor. He was genuinely out of breath when he reached Ed. He noticed that Ed had hit the guard on the back of his head, Karate chop fashion.

"What did you do that for?"

"I'm not sure how much voltage he got. I was trying to be sure he stays out of it." Jules frowned at him. "This one's dead." He dropped the zapper on the floor.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Jules asked Ed.

"I didn't." Ed shrugged. "It's what they do in the movies." Jules raised an eyebrow at him.

"Come on we're not far away now." He led the way.

They were standing at the top of the stairs that led to the Sumerian section. Jules put the glasses back on. Then they heard Rosie's muffled scream followed a short while later by the Professor's voice, shouting. Ed started to run down the stairs, but Jules grabbed him.

"Careful!" he hissed at him. They took positions on opposite walls and crept slowly down into the Sumerian section. Ed had a fresh zapper in his hand. At the foot of the stairs, trying to make themselves as small as possible, they began to creep along the wall towards the light. As they got closer, they could see the man standing behind the girls. They also noticed Rosie's slumped head. Ed stayed as still as he could behind the man, lying flat out on the floor, zapper at the ready. Jules moved silently further round where he could see the Professor and the large man behind him. The large man was pointing a gun at the other, weaselly looking man, clutching a clay tablet. The woman had her back to him, even so he felt her strength. Jules had been listening to them and laughed as he stepped forward into the light.

When Jules saw the key amongst the debris of the broken tablet he quickly backed away and dropped to his knees at a point where he was sure that no one inside the light could see him. He could see the guns trained on his last position and the look of surprise and then anger in the woman's face. She held the key up to the light and calmly examined it. Her sickly smile had returned.

"You have what you wanted," the Professor spoke. "Now leave us!" the woman considered him. Then she walked over to him and Jules watched in horror as she produced the Professor's revolver and rammed it against his head. The old man grunted.

"Shall I shoot him?" the woman asked aloud.

"Leave him alone!" Jules screamed at her. She smiled at him, or where she thought he was in the darkness.

Dennis was concentrating entirely on where he thought the boy was while also waiting for a signal from Suzi. He did not know what hit him. Out of the corner of his eye Jules saw the gunman collapse in a jiggling heap.

"I am not alone!" Jules shouted. He wanted to get her attention and keep it away from Ed.

"Scar face!" it seemed the right thing to say.

The woman scowled in a very nasty way in his direction. Jules noticed the large man had his weapon pointed in the direction of the girls.

"I am fond of the old man, you know." The horrible sickly-sweet smile and tone was back. She ran the barrel of the handgun along the Professor's jaw. He tried to jerk his head away from her and Jules could see the hatred in the Professor's eyes. The woman turned, and Jules could see that her top had come open and that fabulous chest was bulging. His eyes felt like they were popping out; the light reflected off her magnificently. Ed was also in danger of being

mesmerised. He was about to creep up behind the chairs and try to untie the girls, but he stopped dead when he saw the woman's cleavage.

"I wouldn't do anything silly, if I was you." A new voice, loud but level, came out of the darkness. Jules was startled, and his heart missed a beat, it was Ed's dad.

"Now, I have seen a magnificent pair of tits before," he went on, "and more to the point I have a gun in my hand." He paused. "I shall use it." The woman narrowed her eyes and tried to peer into the darkness to see this new threat. Ed's dad fired a shot. The sound was deafening in that room as the bullet destroyed what was left of the display case; it also passed close to Doctor Yonder. They all jumped, but Yonder fell onto the floor where he sat in the rubble and chattered miserably to himself.

The woman was still looking for a way out of her dilemma.

"And I have a gun too." Bill's voice came from behind her. The large man turned quickly, but the woman realised it was all over. Jules could see her shoulders slump and the chest seemed to shrink in size. She smiled rather ruefully and dropped the revolver on the floor.

"I could not really kill my Uncle. Could I?" she almost purred.

"You drop it too!" Ed's dad ordered the large man. "Get it Bill. Ed untie the girls." There was movement on all sides. But Jules was in a state of shock. Did she say 'Uncle'? Her 'Uncle'? He felt rooted to the spot. The Professor was almost snarling at her false face. Ed had untied Collette who was rubbing her

wrists. Ed carefully untied Rosie, he avoided touching the grotesque finger. Jules walked into the light and joined the others. Bill had poked the large man forward. The Professor did not get out of his chair and Jules caught the Professor's eye. He was trying to tell him something, as subtly as he could. His head barely moved in the direction of the woman. Jules understood.

"Let's have the key," Jules demanded. He held his hand out. But he could see the Professor indicating negative. The head seemed to be pointing more to the ruined tablet on the floor. Jules was confused, and he missed the woman's move. Ed's dad noticed her reach inside her top. To get the key he thought.

She was fast.

She threw something on the floor.

Immediately the space was filled with thick, white, choking gas. There were shouts of panic. A shot was fired.

"Don't shoot!" Mr. Toper roared. Jules was knocked over.

"Get the girl!" the woman shouted. There was the sound of scuffling and Jules heard Ed and his dad cry out. The Professor urged Jules to come to him. The woman laughed and there was the sound of running. The gas forced most of them to the walls, spluttering and coughing. Jules walked towards the Professor who was calling him. The old man grabbed his arm fiercely.

"Look for it boy!" he pointed to the clay rubble.

"Look for what?" Jules could barely see the debris in the billowing gas and was coughing and spluttering himself.

"What?" but the old man's grip had ceased, and Jules saw his head slump. Jules dragged the whole chair out to the wall where Bill was coughing with a handkerchief over his mouth. Jules went back into the gas cloud and found the rubble by kneeling and feeling with his hands. Bending closer, he saw a strange thing.

Next to one piece of broken clay the gas was swirling. But sporadically trails were made in the gas, like something invisible was being spat out. As he watched he noticed that they went at all angles and to differing lengths into the gas. A memory stirred in his brain; he had seen something like this before. His mind converged on one thought. Radioactivity.

Then he heard more shouting as all the lights came on. A fan started up and he heard many footsteps approaching. The gas was very quickly drawn off. Then he saw Bill and Ed's dad talking hurriedly to a group of men and women. He looked around. The Professor was still unconscious in the chair. Ed was missing. Jules could not see him.

Or Collette!

Or Rosie!

He stood up and frantically scanned the room. They were nowhere to be seen.

"Mr. Toper!" Jules cried out in desperation.

Chapter 15

Ed had been standing in front of Rosie when the gas suddenly appeared. The next thing he was aware of was being barged over. The large man had knocked him down between the chairs. Ed got up as quick as he could, then heard his dad shout out. Ed could see that Rosie was gone and he shouted out. He could just make out Collette a yard or two away - more confused shouts - then he heard the woman laugh and the sound of running behind him. Collette moved, and he reached to grab her, but he clutched at thick gas. Ed shouted at her.

But she had disappeared.

There was only one thing for it. He went after her.

His feet crunched on the rubble and then his knee hit something that gave a yelp; the Doctor bloke, he thought. Ed staggered a little but kept going. He almost ran into the wall but stopped himself in time. He stood, hands on the wall, listening. He could hear the sound, to his right, of running. Ed followed as quick as he could, one hand touching the wall for assurance. Then the gas thinned out markedly and ahead there was movement. He caught a quick glimpse of Collette's graceful frame racing through a doorway. He shouted at her, but she was gone, Ed ran faster and raced through the doorway after her.

Collette was mad: mad, annoyed, very angry, livid; not like a 'nutter'. The gag in her mouth had been very uncomfortable. Her tongue felt like it belonged to a whale! It must be so swollen, massive! The bindings had cut into her

wrists and they were very sore and rubbed red, her ankles were also painful. However, Collette was also maddened by the big busted scar faced woman who had flashed that chest and the stupid boys had been struck dumb! Well, it seemed like it to her. At that moment Collette so wanted to belt the woman! She hated her! Hated her more than anything she had ever hated! Then amazingly Ed's dad was there. He had fired a shot; her ears were still ringing. Quite quickly they were freed, and she had only one thought, to bash this woman with her gun. She was wondering if she could do this without the others stopping her.

Then the gas seemed to rush up from the floor and cover everything. She caught movements in the thick whiteness then Ed fell heavily next to her and she heard a few shouts. Next, Collette heard that laugh and it incensed her.

She ground her teeth.

She clenched her fists.

She pulled herself to her full height.

Then, like a spring released, Collette rushed after that laugh. She did run into the wall, bounced off, heard them running and sped after them. Ahead she saw the woman open the door and go through, followed by the large man with Rosie over his shoulder.

As she ran through the doorway she heard Ed shouting behind her, but she did not have time to wait for him and he was too slow anyway. It was a stairwell and she chased up the stairs taking many at a time. She could see them

ahead of her. The large man was now ahead and the woman looked around and Collette could see that wicked, sick smile on her face. It further enraged her, and she chased faster. Behind her she could hear Ed on the stairs.

They went up a few flights, Collette was gaining, and Suzi kept smiling, despite the effort. Suzi called to Roy.

"Go on! Call the chopper! Be ready for me! I shall delay them a while."

Roy grunted breathlessly. He tried to go faster while reaching into a pocket.

Roy flicked a switch on a hidden device and the girl slipped slightly in his grip.

Instinctively he flicked a shoulder and she moved back; she was not heavy.

Suzi stopped at one landing and pulled her gun from a pocket; it was not a dart gun. She smiled at the sight of the tall girl racing towards her. At that moment Collette reached the landing below and took a glance ahead. She could see the woman was waiting at the next landing, gun in hand. Collette slid to a stop, panting. She looked venomously at the woman.

"Be a good girl and stay put." Collette heard the patronising tone. "You'll only get hurt. Again." That smile was back. Collette seethed. Suzi could see the anger. She felt that the girl would not stop. Suzi fired into the wall beside the girl, chunks of wall flew off, Collette jumped and winced. At that moment Ed came up the last few steps. He heard the gun and tripped over onto the landing.

"Whoa!" he cried out and crashed into the wall a yard from Collette. Suzi had heard him coming. She aimed and fired twice into the wall above the

bigger boy's head and bits of wall flew off again. Some fell on Ed's head and he held his hand up to shield himself. "Shit!" he yelled very loudly. Collette had flinched at the shots. She quickly glanced at Ed cringing on the landing floor. She was madder than she had ever been, she roared in frustration and charged up the steps.

"I like this girl!" Suzi said to herself. She put the gun away and met the onrush. Collette was blinded by rage and had no plan. She hoped to bowl the woman over and then kick her, or something, jump on her, perhaps. She hurled herself at the woman. But Suzi moved just slightly and deftly deflected the girl into the wall. She quickly hit Collette a couple of times in the ribs; Collette gasped in pain. Then grabbing her by the shoulders, Suzi threw her down the stairs.

Ed got to his feet to find a tumbling, falling Collette, almost on top of him. He tried to break her fall but was knocked back against the wall and fell again. Collette disentangled herself. She screamed in anger and got to her feet.

"Leave it!" Ed shouted at her and he tried to hold her back. But she pushed him away, and screaming in absolute fury, Collette lunged up the stairs once more.

"I do like this girl!" Suzi said to herself and smiled broadly. Collette not blinded by hate would not have taken the woman, it was obvious to Ed, but driven mad with rage she was easy work for the woman. Ed watched as Collette was punched, slapped and kicked backwards. He went to help her but

found himself on the end of a heavy kick that snapped his head back and knocked him over. Collette fell on top of him, her face was blooded. They heard the woman's infuriating laugh. When they looked up again, she was gone.

They staggered to their feet and followed as quickly as they could. At the top of the stairs they emerged onto the roof. They glanced around but saw nothing, then they heard a familiar sound, a helicopter lifted off over their shoulders. They twisted to see the machine rising in the sky; the side panel was open. As they recognised the woman sitting in the helicopter she waved at them, smiling cheerfully. They could see the body of Rosie, her head in the woman's lap, then helicopter moved off into the night and Collette let out a tremendous scream of anger and frustration. Ed ignored it.

"That's some woman!" he said out loud - it was not the thing to say. Collette turned very slowly to him, he was not paying attention, staring into the distance.

"Ouuu!" she shouted at him and gave him a heavy kick in one shin.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" Ed was hopping on one foot. "What did you do that for?!" his hands tried to soothe his shin. "That bloody hurts!" he wailed. "It really does!"

"Oh! Shut up!" Collette gave him a shove. Ed lost his balance and fell over, again. "I'm getting tired of this." He muttered to himself.

Collette met some people on the stairs and she told them that the others had got away in a helicopter, one of the people immediately spoke into a mobile.

Jules was very glad to see two of his friends return. He noticed that Collette was wiping some blood from her face and there seemed to be something wrong with one of Ed's legs, he kept rubbing it lightly. He also scowled at Collette, but she was ignoring him. It was soon clear that the woman had escaped and, worse, she had Rosie as a hostage. Jules also accepted that she had the key. However, Ed had managed to put a tracker on Rosie. He had dropped it down her front before the gas was released; he believed it was caught in her bra. "It was like those babies in the 'Boogie Pimps' video." He leered at Jules. The smile on Jules' face quickly evaporated at the scowl Collette gave the boys. Mr. Toper confirmed that they were able to track them, and they were heading back to the Lodge.

But the main concern at that moment was the condition of the Professor. He had not come around from the gas and his breathing was erratic. Fortunately, not too long after Collette and Ed came back a medical team arrived and treated them all. An oxygen mask brought the Professor back to them and he soon recovered.

Various official people began to arrive which meant that Mr. Toper recounted the affair several times to Policemen, Museum officials and Secret Service people; Jules thought he had identified all of them. Then he noticed the arrival of someone else, someone a bit different, who came with his own guard, it seemed; the man's seniority was evident from everyone else's reaction.

However, he listened to little of the explanations reported to him, choosing quite quickly to come over to speak with the Professor.

The Professor was now more like his old self, the first thing he wanted to know was if Jules had found it, Jules waved the unusually heavy piece of clay rubble at him.

"Break it up and then stand away!" the Professor instructed him. Jules used the revolver to smash the clay scrap. It broke up further revealing a dark metal container.

"Bring a lead box of some kind," he ordered one of the Museum officials. The man looked confused. "Do you have any lead-lined boxes of any kind in the Museum?" the Professor was patient. The man thought for a while then nodded.

"Then get them immediately!" ordered the newly arrived senior man. He issued an order and one of the policemen led the official away at a hurry.

"Professor Keble." The senior man held his hand out.

"Secretary," they shook hands, "good to see you." Jules had the feeling that they were old friends.

"So, are we in trouble, old boy?" the man asked. He looked at Jules who was standing protectively beside the Professor. Jules held his eyes and nodded slightly.

"Yes, and no!" the Professor told him. It drew a thin smile from the Secretary. "The boys and Mr. Tooper have saved the day, here," the Professor

continued. "But Suzi has the key to the chamber and, apparently, she is on her way there by helicopter." The Professor looked directly at the Secretary. "She will get into the chamber." The Secretary nodded once. "She also has a hostage." The Secretary nodded twice.

"You are Jules, I believe." The Secretary addressed him, and they shook hands. Firm grips. "Professor Keble tells me we can expect great things from you." Jules thought he would burst with pride. Out of the corner of his eye he could see his friends and Mr. Toper taking a great interest in the conversation. Jules blushed slightly and merely smiled back at the Secretary.

"But is he up to the task? Is he ready?" the Secretary asked the Professor.

"He is the best we have got, Secretary." A cough came from somewhere, followed by a small voice.

"Professor, I am available." Jules looked to see one of the Museum officials had come forward.

"You, Price!" the Professor was contemptuous. "You are not in the boy's league! He is far and away the best pupil I have ever had. I have prepared him. He is like a sponge. He already knows more than you will ever know, Price!" the man was belittled, Jules felt sorry for him; he also felt embarrassed for himself.

"I have crammed him this last week or two in anticipation of these events." The Professor was talking to the Secretary again. "It will, in fact be easier, now."

"How is that?" the Secretary asked.

"Suzi will be paving the way. She will be first inside and unless she can reset the defences, the way will be somewhat safer for the boys." The Secretary understood. He then realised what the Professor had said.

"The boys? Professor?" he asked.

"Yes, I think it will be best if Jules' friend, Ed, accompany him." Ed moved closer.

"Sweet!" he called out. Jules smiled at him.

"Better friends together, to rescue their other friend." The Secretary seemed sceptical. "There will be no killing, I think, Secretary." The Professor was trying to persuade him. "I suspect that Suzi will take any objects she finds and make a recording of everything else. She will then want to escape to safety. I doubt the girl is in any danger, provided Suzi is not pressured. She will not feel too threatened by the boys." The Secretary considered his words.

"Does it not say, that once opened," the Secretary began, "the chamber if closed again will stay closed forever?"

"Yes."

"The boys might be trapped inside."

"The one piece of information I now have, something that Suzi is not aware of, is that there is another key; an anti-key if you wish. Which if operated correctly will reverse the process and allow the chamber to be re-opened."

"Do we have this anti-key?"

"It is there on the floor." The Professor pointed to the metal object.

"However, it is quite radioactive, hence the lead box."

There was a pause while the Secretary considered the situation.

"Right. We will send the boys in." The Secretary had made his decision.

"Hang on!" Collette shouted out. "I am Rosie's friend too. I want to go. I'll be as much use as the boys."

"Impossible!" Ed's dad told her. "I have only just told your mum and dad that you are safe. They are expecting to see you soon." Collette was deflated.

Chapter 16

The preparations were made quickly: a fleet of helicopters would transport them back to the Lodge. In one would travel the Professor, Jules, Ed, his dad and Collette; in the others were various members of the security services with much equipment. The Lodge and surrounding area was already cordoned off. Many Police and other personnel were in place and they had orders to observe and not interfere when Suzi's helicopter arrived.

Before Suzi's chopper was visible in the slowly lightening sky, she managed to contact them. Using her mobile she showed them Rosie wearing a necklace of explosive material. Suzi warned them that any interference and she would not hesitate to blow the girl's head off. They had been warned to expect something like this, nevertheless, it dampened their spirits.

"So? Professor? Your niece? How does that work?" Ed was trying to change the subject.

"It does not work well at all! Ed," he replied. Jules expected more, but the Professor only added, "it is a long story, it needs telling properly and this is not the time." As he said this, he was looking at Jules.

This avenue had yielded nothing, so, Ed tried a different line.

"Well? Professor? What about this order of 'Gilgalad' stuff? Can we be members? We must qualify after all this?" Collette laughed at him. The Professor looked confused.

"It's 'Gilgamesh' idiot!" Collette scoffed. "The Order of Gilgamesh'. Gilgalad is Tolkien." She shook her head derisively. Jules was surprised she knew the difference; she claimed to read very little.

"I do not know, Ed." The Professor was cautious. "We will have to see. We must first survive this problem." Jules thought it was the word 'survive' that did it. There was no more talk.

They heard over the radio that Suzi's helicopter had hovered over the den. Suzi and the large man had descended using ropes, the helicopter had then moved off. They were having trouble pinpointing its position, which seemed strange to Jules, but no one else appeared concerned. Rosie was obviously not in the helicopter. They must have her in something else, which, evidently, was constantly on the move, so the apparently undiscovered tracker's signal revealed.

Their helicopters put down on the road. Jules, Ed and the Professor were rushed into the Lodge. Mr. Toper took Collette to Jules' house, where her parents were waiting. Jules refused the chance to see his mother. It was time to finish this affair he told Ed. They had to get to the den. They were equipped with headsets that had video and audio links. The Professor stressed that once they were inside the chamber, they were to record everything. Everything! The walls, floors, ceilings, everything.

"Oh! Do be careful!" he urged them, almost as an afterthought. Their signals would be fed directly to the Lodge where an impressive array of equipment was already set up with cables that ran to vans outside.

They went into the garden and prepared to go through the bolt hole.

"Remember the solution will be written in the first script," he whispered to Jules. "She has very little knowledge of it." He patted Jules on the back.

"Good luck boys."

The boys scrambled under the wall and hurried along the path, there was no point in being quiet, the torches they had been given banged against their bodies as they ran.

The instant Suzi had her feet on the soft grass of the den she moved to the stream. Meanwhile, Roy laid out a container on the ground.

"Scrape as much of the grass off as you can ... about here." She had counted paces back from the stream with a plan in her hand. "This is where all those aerial surveys should pay us dividends." She sounded excited. Roy looked all around; he could sense the presence of the Police; they were not very far away. Suzi saw his doubt.

"Roy. They will not risk the girl." She reassured him, he nodded. "We might get a visit from someone else, perhaps." But she just smiled at him.

"Nothing I cannot handle." She walked back to the stream and studied the plan again.

Roy began clearing the ground. He quickly stripped bare the area she had indicated; there was a solid surface underneath. He watched her. She was now standing in the stream.

"Throw me a shovel," Suzi called to him.

She caught it easily. He joined her in the stream as she began scraping off a layer of sediment and small pebbles. It was strenuous work, but she refused his help. Eventually she knelt in the water and used her hands to clear away a last silty covering. Roy watched as she scratched at a surface with a knife. Suzi found a weakness and scooped out a narrow hole. Then she produced the key and pushed it into the hole. She paused to look at him.

"This is it Roy!" her black eyes were alight with excitement.

"Will the water get in the way?" he asked her.

"The water is essential, Roy," she laughed, more warmly than he had ever heard. "The water is needed to suppress the chemical defences." She turned the key. It moved very easily, Roy was impressed with the smoothness, after all these years. Suzi stood up and stepped out of the stream.

"Now it should only be a minute or so." She looked to the bare patch. Roy noted she had left the key in position. Then a sudden low scraping sound made him look up. A stone panel had somehow opened in the patch. Suzi ran to it and kicked away the remaining soil and grass around the edges. Then she very carefully descended some steps.

"Get the camera, Roy!" she called up to him. He saw her torch flashing in the darkness below. "And my bag! Don't forget my bag!"

Roy used his own torch to follow her down. She had stopped at a small platform, about twenty steps from the entrance. He handed her the bag which she slung over a shoulder. Then he passed her the camera. She slung the camera strap over her other shoulder. Attached to the camera was a powerful lamp; she switched it on. Roy could see the narrow passage before them. He could also see that he would have to stoop to get through it. Luckily the width was fine with plenty of room for him that way. Roy watched as Suzi used the light to examine every part of the passage. She took her time. He could see the occasional markings carved on the walls.

"Right." Suzi finally said. "We will start with this." She pulled what looked like a small ball out of her bag.

"Stand back," she ordered. She rolled the ball along the passage floor and using the lamp, they followed its progress. As it rolled a series of effects were produced: many hidden panels slid open and various lethal looking things sprang out. The roll of the ball was accompanied by the sound of traps coming to life after hundreds of years. Suzi noted that they all worked without fail.

Very impressive.

"Good work, 'The Order of Gilgamesh'," she said aloud. Roy watched her closely.

"Is it safe now?" he asked her.

"Not at all!" she smiled at him. "Here, take this, a second." She handed the camera back to him. "Just point it where I say or indicate." She pulled something out of her bag that she manipulated into a long thin rod. She crawled along on her belly and Roy aimed the light where she wanted it. Suzi prodded at the surfaces of the passage as she slowly slinked her way forward. From time to time Roy jumped, slightly, as poisoned darts were triggered. They flew across the passage and harmlessly hit the opposite walls.

After what seemed an eternity, she had reached the end of the passage. "Roy, get down here," he heard her call. Soon he was stooping next to her as she studied the wall blocking the end of the passage. He moved the ball to one side with his foot, it felt heavy.

"I wonder if it is as simple as ..." Suzi said more to herself. He watched her tap a crown symbol several times. Nothing happened. "Humph." She was disappointed.

"Well, let us see if my lovely old Uncle has given the secret away." She pressed some different symbols in turn - Roy could hear her counting to herself under her breath. She stepped back, and the wall slid open noisily.

"We are in Roy!" she was delighted. "Give me the camera."

She used it to scan the room beyond. The lamp illuminated the walls which were crammed full of carvings in many different scripts. The lamp also illuminated many objects propped against the walls and on the floor. Other

things glistened and reflected in the glare from the lamp. There were books and parchments and papers all laid out on stone tables.

Roy gasped. His torch was revealing more treasures.

"The secret chamber of 'The Order of Gilgamesh'." Suzi announced.

She moved into the chamber. Roy followed her as she walked around the space once. Near the chamber entrance Suzi pulled two long standards off the wall and passed them to Roy.

"You can start filling your goodies bag for your boss, Roy." He admired the standards and noted that they both appeared to have Eagles at the top. "One is the fabled standard of the Teutonic Knights," she informed him. "The other is a famous lost standard of a Roman legion; they were destroyed, and no trace was ever found of them."

Roy took them back to the surface. Suzi began to systematically record the walls with her camera. Roy came back and removed other items. He wrapped them carefully and put them gently in the specially padded case. After a while he heard someone coming.

"We've got company." He used his headset.

"What a surprise." Suzi was not at all surprised.

"It's the boys."

Roy had just seen them come through the ferns on the other side of the stream. For a while they stared at each other. Jules noticed the key in the

water, Ed noticed the things in the large man's case. They both saw the entrance to the chamber.

"Invite them in, Roy, and call the chopper."

"You can go in." The large man indicated to the boys with one hand. They noticed his other hand had moved behind his back. Jules crossed the stream; he gave the large man a wide berth. Ed followed, he gave the man a hard stare, but the large man just smiled at him. Jules switched his torch on and carefully descended the steps. Ed did the same.

"Is it safe?" Ed asked Jules as they stood at the bottom of the steps.

"It is now." Jules answered. "She's inside." They could see a light sweeping the chamber beyond. Jules marched down the passage.

"Oh boys!" the voice greeted them as they entered the chamber. "Do come in and see all these treasures." She was using the light to distract them again.

"Ed! We have to concentrate!" Jules gave his friend a dig in the ribs. "You do this side," he indicated to him.

"OK."

The boys split up and began scanning the walls with the tiny cameras in their headsets. The woman laughed at them.

"Well done, boys. The pursuit of Knowledge." She was coming closer to them, carrying the strong light. "Not interested in this gold, or these jewels," she said innocently. They could hear her dropping objects onto a table. Ed

sneaked a look and she smiled very broadly at him. He flushed a little and faced the wall again; a voice had barked in his ear.

"You are such brave boys," she cooed. "With a dear friend in such peril, too." That did it. They both turned to face her. She laughed coldly.

"Tell the people on the other end," she pointed at their headsets, "that if I just pull this little switch here." Suzi pulled an object from a trouser pocket. "Then it's bye, bye, young girl. She is such a pretty thing too." Ed and Jules both growled at her and advanced a step.

"Uh. Uh." She shook her head. They stopped dead. She waved them together and walked past them. At the entrance to the chamber she stopped and faced them.

"I will release your friend. When we are clear. But, you boys." She sounded sad; the sickly smile was there. "You will do well to get out of here." She pressed something, and the wall slid back in place. They heard a faint laugh. Then Jules rushed to the entrance panel. He scanned it and the walls to the side of it.

"Right, do your stuff, Jules." Ed was beside him, trying to be calm. There had been an irrevocable sound to the door sliding shut. A horrible finality that was starting to grip him.

"Any time now would be good." He tried not to sound too concerned.

"Alright, Ed." Jules could not help the anxiety in his voice. Ed was right, this was the time for him to show his worth. He did not want to let the

Professor down. The sound of the entrance shutting above reverberated around the chamber.

"Jules!" Ed was getting worried.

"OK! Don't panic! Give me some space." Jules scanned the area more slowly. A voice shouted in his ear. He focused on one section of the wall. There was the ancient script.

"I cannot see it properly!" Jules heard the Professor's voice.

"But I can." Jules then read out loud:

"AND THE GREAT GODS USED THE UNSEEN FORCE, or is that, ENERGY, TO RELIGHT THE SUN AND MARK THE WAY FOR THE FALSELY ENTOMBED MAN. That's it."

"That helps, yes?" Ed asked him. His voice was hopeful. Jules reached into his pocket and pulled out the lead-lined box.

"Yes, it helps Ed. It helps a lot!" Ed saw the huge smile on his friend's face, and he sighed with relief. He watched as Jules took the radioactive source from the box and held it against a symbol of the Sun on the wall. Nothing happened. Ed glanced sharply at Jules.

"It might take a few seconds." Jules did not look worried. Ed watched the symbol. It slowly started to glow with a bluish light. Jules held the source in place until the symbol seemed to have reached peak brightness. Ed watched him repeat the process with the four other Sun like symbols. When all five

symbols were glowing, Jules used both hands and stretching his fingers, he pressed all five at roughly the same time.

The door sprang open. Ed staggered back in sudden fright. Jules also tottered on his feet. Above them they heard the main entrance slide open. Ed hugged Jules, crushing him.

"You did it mate! You did it!" then he said, "let's get the hell out of here!" he ran up the passage, torch in hand. Jules put the source back in its box and followed Ed. He could hear the Professor's jubilant voice in his ears.

Suzi had leapt out of the main entrance. She could hear the helicopter coming. It was very close. She rushed to the stream and turned the key. The stone panel covered the entrance with a resounding thud. She put the key inside her top. Roy was tying the case to a rope dangling from the chopper. The case was lifted away. Suzi rushed to where Roy was standing just as two more ropes were dropped to them. Making sure the camera was secure she started to climb the rope. Roy did the same. They were being winched up and were soon inside the helicopter.

Suzi looked down at the den, perhaps for the last time. She allowed herself a sly smile. Then to her dismay the stone panel slid open again. The bigger lad soon appeared and cheekily waved up at her. He was soon followed by the smaller boy, who emerged with a triumphant smile. Well, well, she thought, as the Americans would say, we have a new player on the block. Suzi waved back

at Ed and mock saluted Jules. Then the chopper tore away over the wood. She idly played with the detonation device in her hand.

The boys watched the helicopter disappear as the Sun rose.

"That's some woman, Jules." Ed repeated his admiration. Jules did not answer. "Don't you think?" Ed persisted.

"She's evil, Ed." Jules replied, simply.

"Oh! I know! It's just that she's ..." He failed to finish what he was saying. They had been surrounded by many men. Some of them went down the steps to the chamber. The boys went back to the Lodge and there they waited. The minutes went by. The Professor curtailed his excitement and pleasure at the outcome; the boys were worried about Rosie.

Jules' mother came rushing in and overwhelmed her son with affection. The Professor persuaded her to stop. They waited. Ed could see Rosie's parents outside by one of the vans, their faces fraught with worry. It was hard to bear. Collette and her parents were with them, doing their best to help. Then a man rushed up to them and gave them good news. There was an outburst of raw emotion.

"Something's happened." Ed reported. "It looks good." Within a minute Ed's dad came shouting up the stairs to tell them Rosie was safe. In a matter of minutes, a helicopter delivered Rosie to the loving embrace of family and friends alike. Tears were shed. Then she had to go to hospital to have her finger treated.

Before Rosie went, she passed a message on for the boys. It was from Suzi. She had said, 'tell the boys, I will see them again!' Ed grinned rather inanely at this. Jules and the Professor exchanged dark looks.

"It's not over is it, Professor?" Jules asked him quietly.

"No, my boy. It never is. For you it is just starting!" but Jules was short on enthusiasm. He felt very tired and just wanted to go home to bed.

"We have a lot of work to do, Jules." The old man knew not to push it.

"When you are ready, come and see me." He beamed at his pupil, "use the front door."