

BOOK EXTRACTS:

Chapter One

THE pencil lightly held between index finger and thumb, resting on the curled middle finger; the hand relaxed, the wrist stable, only the arm in motion as the pencil point slides over the paper and the graphite trail is laid...

A single curving line, slow and sure, winding across the white field of the page and looping back upon itself twice, ending in a delicate curl... And where before there was only paper and graphite there is now the tendril of a vine, two-dimensional but unmistakable, a true representation of a living plant saved on the page for anyone to see. What magic there is in drawing. How immensely satisfying to identify the correct place for each element and then to put it there.

Rebecca lifted her hand from the sketchbook and looked at the vine she had drawn. Not perfect, but not bad. Perhaps each element had not been put in exactly the correct place, but the places were pretty good. With her artist's eye she judged the proportions of what she had made, measuring angles and spaces and relationships, and then checked against the casket in the cabinet in front of her and the vine that had been carved in the ivory over one thousand years before.

Close. She had emphasised the tendrils over the leaves because they attracted her the most – the spirals and the curls. They almost appeared to move, to tremble in some unseen breeze.

Actually, there was a light breeze in the gallery now – or rather a draught, of course. It was fresher than the museum draughts usually were, though, with a scent of something herbal. Someone must be wearing perfume.

She glanced along the gallery but it was quiet, as the Victoria and Albert Museum often was midweek – just a couple working their slow way along the cabinets, and somebody sketching at the display in the centre. He must have come after she had got started; it was surprising that she hadn't noticed him arrive, even if she had been immersed in drawing.

He was seated with his back to Rebecca, and all she could see of him was his hair hanging forward and that he was wearing a denim shirt and jeans. Then he moved his hand to hook the hair behind his ear and the curtain was lifted revealing the extreme edge of his brow and cheek and jaw, with its impression of age (twenties) and structure (sharp-boned) and colour (lightly tanned).

Rebecca sat forward a little. Now she could see his eyelashes and from them could gauge how his attention was split between the object he was drawing and the drawing he made. She observed him observing, looking steadily at the artefact in the cabinet for eight seconds? ten? and then down at the paper while he drew what he had memorised. The proper way, Rebecca noted approvingly, the artist's way, not flicking back and forth anxiously but looking, learning, and then reproducing with confidence.

Certainly confidence because he was drawing in ink. That was intimidating. Rebecca's finished work was often in ink, but produced with time and patience in her studio; her museum drawing was in pencil. With ink there was no

possibility of removing an error of proportion or perspective, every decision there on the page for good. And he appeared to be using a sketchbook in a square format. That was intimidating too. Square sketchbooks are hard to find, and – Rebecca thought, glancing down at her commonplace rectangular book – suddenly strangely desirable.

The couple had reached the end of the gallery. There was almost complete quiet – just the occasional squeak of their shoes on the polished floor and the soft rasp as the artist's – the other artist's – hand moved across the paper. He lifted his head again to study his subject and some of the hair escaped from his ear and closed his face once more from view.

Rebecca thought, He is so intent on drawing that he has no notion of my being here, just as a minute ago I wasn't aware of him. And he certainly has no idea that I'm watching him.

For a long moment, as if of stretched time, she enjoyed the sensation of being hidden from him, observing him unimpeded by good manners. Then, as she saw him move his attention once more from subject to sketch, she remembered that she should be doing the same and turned her gaze back to the ivory casket.

She had only been able to see his back, anyway.

The casket sat on its plinth, eleven hundred years old. Eleven centuries of opening and closing and being picked up and set down and now resting in this sealed glass tomb. Vines crept about its ivory lid and sides, with grapes bunched and tendrils extending, reaching out to find and grip, a network of stems and roots growing denser and deeper, drawing in and thrusting away, both together, ancient and modern, antique as the millennium-old ivory and modern as the Virginia creeper in the garden at Manorfield Road, twisting and rustling and deeply, disturbingly green...

It was not the first time Rebecca had been interrupted in her drawing by the museum closing. Once you get into drawing, really properly into it, you lose track of time. The five minutes announcement pierced her concentration and she leaned back, stretching her shoulders, and then felt about for her pencil case. On the floor, under her stool. She slipped her pencil in, and her eye fell on the sketchbook open on her lap.

'Good God!'

The exclamation broke from her quite involuntarily, and in the quiet gallery sounded shockingly loud. The artist glanced up.

'You okay?'

Confused and embarrassed, Rebecca stared at him.

'No. Yes. Sorry. I'm fine.'

He looked doubtful. 'Sure?'

'Yes, yes, sure. Sorry.'

What an idiot. She felt herself flush and hoped it didn't show. She saw him drop his eyes to her page before turning away.

Rebecca looked again at her drawing.

The casket had disappeared. Or rather almost disappeared, for the outline of its chunky shape was just discernable at the top of the page through the tangle of foliage that had sprawled, coiling and trailing, outwards over the double spread, ignoring and over-running the spiral binding. Shockingly, the vine had

gone mad, rejecting the subordinate role of decoration and seizing the limelight. As a representation of a ninth century casket it left a lot to be desired; as a study of rampant botanical growth it was rather wonderful.

But Rebecca had no memory of having drawn it.

At home, after the obligatory five minutes with Aunty Edie, Rebecca opened the sketchbook and looked at her work again, trying to be objective. So what if she had been daydreaming? She had drawn this whether or not she remembered each line. How good was it, that was the question.

The balance wasn't always right – here and there the flow of the stems was interrupted and the page was a little top heavy – but the drawing was strong and dynamic, and she couldn't help but feel pleased. Too much concentration, or too little? Either way, imagination had got into the mix somehow. The vine held treasures.

There were grapes and flowers and leaf buds, and there were also small birds and insects, and spiders' webs stretched from stem to stem. There was a bird's nest lined with moss and with eggs inside. And then, bizarrely, there was an area where the stems sprouted thorns and became a dog rose, with open flowers and fat rosehips, and then, further on, scalloped oak leaves and acorns. There were five cockle shells held in the stems on the right hand page, and a fair stab at a mouse's skull, like the one which, strangely, lay on Aunty Edie's mantelpiece, and what looked like the pinion feather of a largish bird – a magpie or a pigeon or a seagull.

As the drawing developed across the page a handful of seemingly random objects began to appear – objects that had no business in any vine: a compass with spidery legend; the ornate hands – but no face – of a clock; a lit candle, its flame blown sideways by an invisible breeze; a scroll of paper with ragged, deckled edges; a spool of thread; and at the foot of the right hand page, surely almost the last thing she had drawn before being jerked from her trance, a key, with simple wards but a complex, decorated handle held tight in the coils of the vine.

Weird. Imagination in over-drive. Unsettling didn't come near.

Don't think about it. Aberrations happen. Forget it.

When she told herself not to think about something, Rebecca usually succeeded. Somewhere in her past, perhaps after her mother's accident, she had learned the power of distraction and now, determined to ignore the peculiar uncontrolled drawing, Rebecca closed the book and went to see what could be turned into supper.

Her flat – flatlet, really, or a flatling perhaps – had what was surely the tiniest kitchenette in London. Anything smaller would be just a cupboard.

There was a half-sized sink with a half-sized draining board, and a single cupboard with a counter over, on which could stand a sandwich maker, a toaster, or an electric casserole. They had to take turns, whichever was in use. There was a 'fridge, and the rest of the food – bread, rice, pasta – lived in a crate on top. There was absolutely no extra space at all, and Rebecca frequently opened a can or chopped vegetables at her desk.

Still, it was home and it was wonderful, because it was in the capital and everything, or everything she needed, was close by. Since cutting her ties with

home and running away to art college, Rebecca had been living rent-free in this bedsit at the top of Aunty – Great-aunt really – Edie’s Edwardian house, and she knew she was immensely fortunate.

Especially since dropping out.

Rebecca settled for a toasted sandwich, and plugged in the sandwich maker to start warming up while she sliced bread and cheese and tomatoes. Thank goodness summer was on its way and salad would be refreshing again instead of merely cold.

Dropping out had been inevitable, she told herself with the unassailable conviction of the pig-headed. All the high-concept stuff, all the installation art, wasn’t what she had wanted at all. She knew she had talent. She had been selling work for two years by the time she left school – designs for greetings cards, playbills for amateur dramatic societies; even a series of stitched silk wall hangings after being seduced by the sheen and jewel colours of silk fabrics, which she had exhibited in a gallery in nearby Southwold.

The college hadn’t offered technical lessons in draughtsmanship, focusing instead on experimentation, and after two terms Rebecca was having no more. She had surrendered her student loan and put together a portfolio of illustrations suitable for children’s books to tout round the publishers, and in the meantime had been admitted to a small craft co-operative in Wandsworth where she could exhibit her stitched hangings.

It was precarious and Rebecca knew she could not have survived without Aunty Edie, so the brief chats she endured every time she left the house or returned were, she supposed, a reasonable payment. Tiresome, but fair.

Washing up later, gazing out of the window over the rows of terraced houses, Rebecca wondered yet again what would happen if she didn’t find work, proper work. She couldn’t sponge off Aunty Edie forever and returning home to the farm was not enticing.

Something has to come. Soon.

Chapter Thirteen

AUNTY Edie was napping in the parlour with her feet up. Thankfully, Rebecca climbed the stairs and let herself into her flat. She hung up her coat, dumped her rucksack in the corner and dropped into her chair. Then she withdrew the key from her jeans pocket and held it on her palm.

It looked very old. The iron was dark, although not as black as the medieval keys in the museum. It was warm now from having been in her pocket, and felt smooth to the touch.

She turned the ribbon over with her finger, peering at the tiny stitches that marked the date. The knot was tight and probably impossible to undo. It had been tied more than one hundred and fifty years ago. Who tied it? Someone wearing a crinoline? Or a stove hat and tail coat? It had been tied while Charles Dickens was campaigning against the Yorkshire schools; while Trollope was still a postmaster, scribbling away every evening; before Atlanta burned in the

American Civil War; before Albert died and when Victoria was still wearing colours. It had been dangling from that hook on that cupboard door in that porter's lodge for one and a half centuries, waiting.

And now she had it in her hand.

But she couldn't keep it in her hand for ever. Where should she put it for safekeeping? Not that she was likely to be burgled – not that a burglar would be likely to steal this even if she were – but it was irreplaceable and needed a secure home.

Not her underwear drawer, reputedly the first place burglars look for hidden jewellery. After some thought, Rebecca sealed the key inside one of the small plastic bags she used for beads and dropped it into her biscuit tin. That way she wouldn't have a chance to forget where it was.

She woke up her Mac, accessed email and called up a new document to let Michael know the first element was retrieved.

WHY now, Celia wondered, why should this business especially preoccupy her now?

Not for any obvious reason that she could see. The first anniversary of the old man's death had passed without disturbance. The bizarre arrangements he had left had not been commented on recently, even by the appalling Olwen – who persisted in the belief that they were friends with an astonishing imperviousness to rudeness – and she was not aware of having had her attention drawn to the cottage beyond what was usual and inevitable. Yet for several days it had possessed her, squatting in her mind all her waking hours and looming through her sleep.

Why now?

Usually there was some event, some recollection, that was the trigger – an item in the news, perhaps, or a notice in the obituaries of the death of an acquaintance – ever more frequent now, her age being what it was. Not that she allowed anyone she met these days to know it, of course. She took great care with her grooming and wardrobe, just as she always had, and they would never have believed her.

But nothing of this sort had occurred recently. The curtains remained drawn behind the cottage's low windows and the day-trippers tramped their careless way through the house and gardens. She continued to report for duty on her scheduled afternoons, taking up station beside the abandoned toys or costumes or musical instruments, trotting out the same trite replies to the same trite questions and doing her best not to allow her distaste to become apparent. It was all she could do, and so she did it, while her expectations dwindled and the bitterness grew.

But what had recently happened? What had changed? What was pressing this business to the forefront now?

She must watch and listen. And think.

REBECCA woke feeling groggy, her mind a jumble of thoughts and visions and emotions. She hadn't slept well, which was unusual, and felt unsettled.

Hardly surprising, all said and done.

Until today – or rather yesterday – she had not really believed in what she was doing. Not truly. She thought she had, obviously, or she would never have been induced to take precious time away from her work to indulge in petty (*I hope it's petty*) larceny.

But it was different now, and from this new place she had arrived at, this new Rebecca could see that she had been going through the motions before – doing what was expected, what she had agreed to do, as if in honour of a contract.

All that had changed. The moment she had seen the key on the hook, the instant she had read the date stitched into the ribbon, she had entered a new state of being, as if through a door. Like the paternoster machine she had seen in Yorkshire at one of those 'hands on' museums, she had stepped onto a platform and it had lifted her away from her everyday life, transporting her to somewhere close by but entirely new.

It was tremendously exciting, so exciting that it left her no room to think about anything else. There were only the trails she had to follow, and the elements of the key she had to collect, and Michael whom she would tell.

Michael.

If this was real, if all he had told her was true, then it followed that he had told the truth about his pedigree also – and hers. 'A fairy?' she had said, a little too loudly, too aggressively. 'Are we talking about fairy blood?'

Michael had raised his eyebrows. 'No. Absolutely not. Let's just say he was someone not human, from another place not this one. And he brought with him – left behind him – qualities unlike ours.'

In other words, a fairy bearing magic. Holy cow.

And if Michael bore Faerie blood, then so did she.

And so did Aunt Edie.

Rebecca ate two bowls of cornflakes, being out of bread even half-way fresh, and descended to the ground floor. Her aunt was in the back room clearing the table after her own breakfast.

'Aunt Edie? Have you got a minute?'

Aunt Edie put the kettle on and made them a pot of tea, despite having only just finished one, and they drank it looking out over the back garden with its tubs of red and white geraniums.

Rebecca said, 'I thought I'd better warn you that I might be away from time to time for a few weeks. I'm doing some research' (true) 'and will probably have to go up to Oxford again. Or somewhere else. I'll let you know, of course.'

'How lovely. What are you researching? Art history?'

With her grammar school background her aunt had never really got to grips with the non-academic nature of Rebecca's chosen career. She seemed sure that some good, sound essay writing must come into it somewhere.

Rebecca said, 'Sort of,' and quickly moved on. 'Aunt Edie, you were telling me about your Aunt Cicely. Do you remember anything about the rest of the family?'

'Oh, you're doing genealogy!' Edie said, understandably getting the wrong idea.

Although, perhaps not.

'Um, well, I have been to the Family Records Office,' Rebecca admitted.

Aunt Edie got to her feet. 'Just a minute. Now where is it?'

She delved into the bottom cupboard of the sideboard and then straightened up holding an old Woolworths exercise book. 'Look. I did what I could before Mother died. I didn't have much time to spend on it, but I got this far.'

She handed the book to Rebecca, and Rebecca opened the cover.

'A family tree. Our family tree!'

Why didn't I think to ask?

The plan had been drawn in sections over several pages in Aunt Edie's tidy, sloping handwriting, and Rebecca couldn't immediately find the name.

'I shan't be doing any more with it now,' Aunt Edie was saying. 'You keep it, dear. Now, what can I tell you about the family?'

Rebecca forced herself to close the exercise book and hold it on her lap while she listened.

'Well, there was only Aunt Cicely on my mother's side,' Edie began, back in her chair and comfortably settled. 'The two boys died in infancy, you see. Terrible, but quite common then, of course. Cicely was wild, drove her parents mad. Wouldn't settle down with anyone. Travelled all over the world in her twenties, I think I told you, and that wasn't common then. But she came back with wonderful stories.'

Rebecca saw her aunt's hand move up to settle on her chest, patting the soft jersey beneath which lived the golden vine leaf.

'Any other aunts?' she prompted.

'Oh yes, lots on my father's side. He came from a very large family. Two of my uncles died in the first world war – Father was the eldest of his family, you see, so although he was – let me see – thirty-ish in 1914, his brothers were that bit younger and went straight into the trenches. Infantry, you know. Terrible. But my father was behind the lines most of the time, although I know he did see some action.'

This wasn't what Rebecca wanted to hear. 'And your grandfather, he married again, didn't he, after your grandmother died? Do you know anything about his second wife? Did you ever meet her?'

'Oh yes, we always stayed in touch. Weddings, you know. And funerals. Wonderful chance to catch up, funerals.'

'So you met their children as well,' Rebecca ploughed on, working her way slowly towards Michael. 'Do you remember any of them? Or their children?'

'No, dear. They died before I was born. In the 'flu epidemic after the first world war. Dreadful. Whole family was wiped out. Well, the children, I mean.'

'But not all of them,' Rebecca persisted. 'Surely not all of them?'

'Weren't they?' Edie looked confused for a moment and passed Rebecca a dubious glance. 'Have you been researching the family tree as well?'

Rebecca tried not to squirm. 'Well, not really. A bit. I'm sure', she carried on swiftly, 'there was a boy, wasn't there? Who survived into adulthood? Michael?'

'Michael... Oh yes, Michael. He was a bit different, that one. I remember. I met him at some family gathering, I can't remember what now. Oh yes, I do, it was Cicely's funeral. She was killed in the blitz – refused to leave London. She was working in the WVS cooking dinners for all the poor bombed out families in the East End. Another tragic death – she should have lived to be a hundred.'

'Michael was there then, home on leave from the RAF. I was fourteen and he was twenty-nine, which is a world away of course when you're that age – he was

a grown up and I was just a school girl, but I thought he was utterly gorgeous, a real dreamboat, unbelievably handsome. Made us all swoon.'

Rebecca stared at the shrunken old lady sitting in the armchair with her cup and saucer on her lap.

'Very black hair and eyes, and such long eyelashes for a man. Perfect skin. Very slim and upright but not quite tidy, you know? A little bit bohemian. And lovely manners – so courteous but with just enough humour to loosen us up, if you know what I mean.'

'Yes,' Rebecca said, 'but what I wanted to know –'

'But without ever going too far. And very sensitive, you just knew that by looking at him. At his eyes.'

'Yes, but –'

'Very intelligent, too.'

'Right.'

'Graceful hands.'

'I –'

'Very good teeth.'

Like father, like son. Rebecca pulled herself together. 'Was he – did he – do you remember anything –'

'I've never forgotten how that flowering cherry came into blossom just before his mother died. We went up to visit her and pay our respects – she had been ill for a for a few weeks, cancer I expect – and all you could see from her window was that tree with all the blossoms. It was far too early for it to be flowering, but there it was, and the petals drifting in when there was a breeze. There always did seem to be a breeze when Michael was about – just a light breeze, a gentle one, full of lovely summer scents...'

A breeze ...

'He lived a charmed life, I used to think,' Rebecca's aunt continued, her gaze on the window opposite but her mind's eye in the past. 'Do you know he went right through the war without ever being injured? And he was shot down more than once... And I don't remember hearing that he ever died. I wonder if he's still alive. He'd be in his nineties now, of course.'

That thought hadn't occurred to Rebecca.

'He married an American girl and moved to Scotland, I believe.'

Scotland! That thought hadn't occurred to her either!

'So take care, dear.'

Rebecca snapped to attention and found her aunt looking at her and the mood changed. 'I'm sorry?'

'Be careful. With what you're doing. Take care.'

'Yes, of course.'

Aunty Edie sighed and put down her cup. 'It's so easy to get caught up when you're young. Not that you shouldn't get caught up, of course, but it's a tricky business and things may not always be all they seem. You must keep a sharp eye out. And, here...'

Edie fumbled behind her neck and then held out the gold chain, unfastened, with the exquisite vine leaf swinging. 'You have it, Rebecca,' she said. 'You wear it now.'

Rebecca stared. 'Oh, Aunty Edie, I can't. It's beautiful. It's yours. You must keep it.'

'Yes, it is beautiful. But Cicely gave it to me, and now I'm giving it to you. Wear it, Rebecca, and be careful.'

Chapter Forty-One

I NEED a nap.

No I don't, I need a proper sleep.

Rebecca looked out of the passenger window at the hedgerows and stone walls bordering the road. The BMW was quiet and smooth, not at all like the rented hatchback.

She was slightly horrified to find herself in Geoffrey Foster's car and was doing her best to avoid conversation. This was a churlish response to his offer to drive her back to the hostel since Michael did not want to leave Ashendon, but tough. She had said Thank-you.

Michael had also offered, but as it was clear that he intended to drop her and come straight back to the cottage she had not felt able to refuse Foster's invitation. He hadn't been completely oily, and had actually been quite helpful over the business with the key... In fact, very helpful. How long would it have taken any of them to guess that the design of the wards represented the layout of the cottage rooms?

He was still irritating though, like a piece of grit in one's shoe that's still there even after you've taken the shoe off and shaken it. It would have been much more enjoyable if he hadn't found them here, even if it had added several days to their search.

What does his family think he's doing? Or maybe he isn't married.

Rebecca considered the leery half-smile he wore so much of the time, and the traces of booze on his breath.

No, he probably isn't.

I wonder how old he is. Forty-ish? Younger than Michael, then, even though he looks much older.

Rebecca frowned. Michael. Now there was a much bigger problem than how to keep Geoffrey Foster at arm's length. Just what was Michael intending to do tonight? He had something planned, she was certain, something more than the simple – *hah!* – worry about the gap being successfully secured, and she had a horrible notion that she knew what it was.

He was thinking all the time, she knew. You could say something to him, ask him a question, and watch his attention slowly turn to you as if from a great distance. It was as though he were hauling his mind away from what it would prefer to be involved with in order to deal with your paltry, finicky little problem.

He always did it with good grace, though. He was never sharp or sarcastic, never irritable. Just the dark eyes narrowed as if he were seeing something you couldn't, and then sometimes that slow, half-smile.

What was it with men and half-smiles? But Michael's was so different from Foster's – kind and a little rueful. *I'm sorry*, it seemed to say, *Don't worry, it isn't*

your fault. It made Rebecca's insides churn.

I need a nap.

To go to bed at eleven o'clock and then get up two hours later to save the world was not on. Whatever the others elected to do, Rebecca intended to eat lunch, take a bracing walk, and go to bed at four o'clock so that when she got up at midnight she would have had eight hours' sleep and would feel rested and ready.

That was the theory. In all probability she would feel like death, totally jet-lagged, but at least she would have a chance of getting in shape by two-thirty.

Two twenty-five, rather.

She realised she had absolutely no idea of what was going to happen. It was nearly midday now. By midday tomorrow – what? Annihilation? Or looking for a nice pub for lunch?

She would have to turn her head soon or her neck would get stiff. She shifted discretely and began to look forward through the windscreen, hoping her change of position wouldn't be interpreted as a readiness to be sociable. She recognised the turning to the hostel.

Less than five minutes to go.

And I do know what Michael's planning. I do know what he wants to do. And I have got – have got – to be alert.

* * *

MY, how they all resented him! Don't put yourself out, sweetheart, I'm just the chauffeur.

Not that he took offence. It was amusing in a way, like gate-crashing a party of twenty-somethings to find out what passed among them for a good time. Sociology. Or rather, anthropology – the observation of the behavioural traits of another species. Children had always seemed like another species to Geoffrey, or at least since he had ceased to be one, and at – what was she? Nineteen? Twenty? Twenty-one? – Rebecca seemed hardly past childhood to him. In some respects she seemed younger than the boy, with his nervy, suspicious stare.

And Michael, the Leader of the Pack, what about him? Forty-four and he didn't look thirty, and there was something not quite...

Well. Something, anyway.

And all of them with that odd hair, not just dark but truly black. Most unusual for white-skinned people. And those looks. You could start an inferiority complex, hanging around with these three, rubbing shoulders with perfection all day – you could start to think you were the odd one. And they had no idea, none of them. The boy showed no tell-tale habits – never flicked his hair back, or preened – nor the girl, with her scraped, bare face and spiky crop. Nor Michael, of course, cool to the point of refrigeration.

But there they were. He had studied the human race a bit, he had learned to read who cared about what and how much they would pay. These three were just out of the picture, somehow – off the graph. Thank God he didn't have to sell a house to one of them! Definitely three of a kind...

Or were they? Or were they in fact four?

Where did Celia Scanlon fit in? Same bloodlines, no doubt about that – she had the same straight, slim build, the same symmetry to her features, the same

black, black hair. But she cared how she looked, my God, and how! Fashion princess if ever there was one. Yet she too gave the impression there was more, under the surface, coasting silently without making a ripple but waiting, like a pike in deep, dark water.

He had been taken by surprise when she approached, having spotted him talking with them at the house, but pleased to be presented with an ally. Of course she believed him to be her creature, but he was most definitely his own man, thank you, and biding his time.

They would have a shock tonight, the dears, when she turned up. Michael intended to make whatever repairs were necessary to this – leak – and then seal it up tight. Well, not with Celia and himself on the team. Criminal! Imagine the potential of such a source of power, what could be done with it. What impossibilities could be made possible. The nearest thing imaginable to pure magic.

Actually the girl had the right idea. A quiet afternoon, I think, and no alcohol – definitely no alcohol. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed is what we need to be tonight, Geoff. Pull this off and we could be made.

He swung the car round in front of the hostel. 'Here we are! I'll come for you around half past midnight.'

So much for the ingénue; now for the sophisticate.

HE was a fool, of course. Didn't know it, wouldn't believe it, but that didn't alter the case.

He has no idea. No idea at all.

Did he really think he could tame the meeting of the worlds? That an alternate universe, could be mined or tapped or harnessed in some way to make mere money? His simplistic, self-seeking, pedestrian motives had been transparent to her from her first five minutes in his company.

Well. She had learned long ago that you can always rely on the never ceasing greed of small-minded men. He'd be so centred, with his tunnel vision and his dreams of riches, that he wouldn't notice what was happening until it was too late. He'd likely freeze anyway, that type was never the sort for action.

Celia had had enough experience of men like Foster to predict pretty accurately his response to physical threat: a rabbit caught in the headlights, transfixed and shivering, staring as ruin bore down upon him.

He wouldn't stop her. Nothing would stop her. My God, one hundred and one years she had been waiting and planning. What did this Michael think he was going to do to seal the gap? Play with his toys and knit a padlock?

What had his daddy told him? And his grandpa? 'It's all down to you, precious. Save the world and live happily ever after in the luxury you deserve.'

Celia became aware that the tendons in her neck were taut, and the muscles in her arms and thighs. She relaxed them, breathing deep.

Not much longer. In a few hours all four of them would feel very differently, oh yes, all of them, from the stupid estate agent to the school boy in his sorry, dirty plimsolls.

Over a century of waiting and now only a few more hours.

REBECCA had had the right idea, but the prospect of trying to sleep in the next room to her, with the light streaming in through the flimsy curtains and the hot air and the creaky bunks, had been more than he could face. Instead he left Michael in the cottage and wandered out to the gardens.

There was a series of walled areas beyond the courtyard which seemed to escape most of the visitors, and Connor drifted through the rows of vegetables and cold frames before finding himself in a square of mown grass with rose trees around the edge and a spreading magnolia in the centre. It was very quiet and the grass was dry and smooth. He lay on his back in the shade with his knees bent up, and closed his eyes.

Sleep for a bit, eat later.

And then, what?

Connor tried to think about tomorrow. It seemed impossible. Tonight was a chasm, a gulf dividing Now from Then, and the fact that the minutes would march on, the hours would be used up just as they always are, seemed incredible. Tomorrow could not be contemplated while there was still tonight.

How was it going to work? Was it going to work at all? What would happen at two twenty-five?

Connor pictured the four of them – it seemed inevitable now that the estate agent would be there – gathered in the parlour, staring through the doorway, waiting for the miraculous to happen.

Did he believe it would? It seemed so implausible, so fantasy-fiction. A gateway into Fairyland. Or according to Foster, a way to increase the capacity of computers by one thousand percent.

Connor pictured the estate agent, with his patronising air and his carefully chosen clothes. If this happened tonight, if it actually came to pass, he was going to be peeing in those smart trousers.

Then he thought about Rebecca, so single-minded and so blinkered. She probably didn't believe it was going to happen either, but at least if it did she wouldn't wet herself. Would she care, though? Or would it be a case of good riddance to bad rubbish?

No, not that. She didn't deserve that.

He tried to think about it, to imagine her response.

Pragmatic. She'll be the one sorting it all out afterwards. Good luck to her!

And Michael. Connor turned onto his stomach and buried his face in his folded arms. He didn't want to think about Michael, but he was there anyway, despite his shut eyes.

I'm sorry, Michael.

MICHAEL finished the call and pocketed his phone. As he had suspected, there hadn't been much to say, really. He was sure now that his father knew.

I wish I knew how this is going to work.

Impossible not to try to guess. Impossible not to sit on the floor and place one's palm against the plaster, feeling the gentle dip, searching to feel something more.

What will I have to do? What will I be able to do?

What about Rebecca and Connor?

Rebecca will tough it out. It might take her a while – I hope not. But she'll

survive. Connor ...

Damn. He'd be fooling himself if he thought Connor would survive this intact. Better if he'd never joined them. But he had been needed, and at the time it seemed a kindness to bring him into the fold.

Some fold. Some shepherd.

Michael sighed. Can't be helped. All that he could do now was to wait and see.