

THE SECRET LETTERS

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ZAFFRE
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Also by Catherine Law

Map of Stars

*Dedicated to the memory of Gertrude Charlton and
all those who follow their dreams*

PROLOGUE

Cornwall, June 1992

The floorboards had been squeaking for months. Wincing as she knelt down, her arthritic joints creaking in protest, she coaxed the nails with the claw end of the hammer. Aged and rusty, they came out easily, like pulling a knife out of butter. The furrows in her brow relaxed. Irritation was replaced by satisfaction: one more tiresome chore – boringly regular in this old house – was dealt with. Lifting the small section of floorboard, she stopped. She caught a glimpse of what looked like paper in the gap between the joists. As she lowered her hand into the void, her fingers brushed the letters in their dusty grave.

Holding the envelopes in her hands, she was struck by a bright, soul-cleansing understanding. The letters were still sealed and were addressed to her. Many minutes passed as she stared at them: moments when she knew not the difference between happiness and grief; life and death. She knew he would speak to her again one day; she knew he'd let her know, somehow.

In her hands were his letters to her: unread, unknown, unearthed forty-six years after she had last seen his face.

How could it possibly be any other way?

Cornwall, September 1992

Leaning out of her bedroom window, Rose Pepper could see to the edge of her world. Beyond her garden wall lay the churchyard, where long grass between the graves was hazy in the Indian-summer light. Rising cheerfully above the crooked headstones sat the granite church, squat and small. She squinted. On one side of her garden was the post-war cube of the new vicarage and the cluster of stone cottages that made up the hamlet of Trelewin. To her right was the stile and footpath that led to Pengared Farm. These days, the church was her boundary. What lay beyond was softened and blurred as if by tears, but really, she corrected herself, by geriatric myopia.

She rested her arms on the stone sill, feeling the residual warmth from the sun that had long moved round to the front of the house that faced the sea, its golden light sparkling like diamonds on the water. Her home, the Old Vicarage, had stood there on the cliff for a hundred years: granite walls and a Gothic facade withstanding all that the Cornish weather threw at it. If she cared to observe, she would see a century's worth of scars: rainwater stains, a leaning chimney, a loose roof tile here and there. *I have lived in this house for nearly half of its life*, she reminded herself, rubbing at the smooth stone sill with her fingertip. *And for three-quarters of my own.*

Her daughters often wondered why she chose to use this room at the back for a bedroom. After all, the great bay window at the front commanded the sea. But Rose knew what constituted a good view. The garden lay before her, shimmering. Butterflies bounced among frothing purple lavender; roses melted into one another like scoops of ice-cream. Her eyes rested on the corner by the far wall where, under the spreading boughs of a cherry tree, lay a patch of long glossy grass. The tree had been planted in the year after the war, and she had watched it grow. Every autumn, leaves fell from the cherry and covered the grass around its trunk; she never raked them up. Nettles flourished in this corner, for the butterflies, she conceded, and she allowed ivy to grow wild, crawling from the stone wall between the garden and the

churchyard to tangle itself around the tree. Every year the creeping ivy fingers reached further still. *I like this bedroom. I like this view*, she told herself. *I can keep watch from here.*

She used to be able to see so much further from the window: beyond the stile that marked the edge of the glebe, even to where the footpath snaked over the rise of the headland on the far horizon. She could, however, still make out the old letterbox that once belonged to Pengared Farm. It stood, rusting on a pole by the stile, guarded by brambles. During the war, the postman only went so far, and it was up to Betony or Ted Cumberpatch to come and fetch his or her own post, walking the two miles across the headland from Pengared Farm to Trelewin. A lifetime ago.

From the cooking aroma rising up the stairs, Rose calculated she had about fifteen minutes' peace before she'd be called by her daughters for dinner. Lara was cooking chicken fricassee downstairs in her kitchen. It was one of Betony Cumberpatch's recipes 'which *always* work': a special meal before the three of them left tomorrow on their trip to Prague. That was Lara's thing: cooking. Her elder daughter Nancy's thing was finding fault. If Rose was to have her way, it would have been fish and chips from the village: so much easier when there was all the packing to do. But then Nancy would not have approved.

Rose sighed, squinting hard through the fading late-afternoon light at the rusting letterbox, remembering how, when she worked as the Cumberpatches' land-girl, she used to reach in past cobwebs and snails for their post. She wanted to go down there now and grasp that stupid pole, wrench it from the ground and sling the whole thing over the hedge. She did not want a celebratory meal. She did not want the fuss. But ever since she had found the letters under the floorboards in the spare room, her life had become one big fuss. They were such innocent things: three simple brown envelopes. Krystof had addressed them so diligently to her at Pengared Farm, and yet they never made it to her. They only got as far as that cursed letterbox for Pengared.

When she unearthed them – was it really three months ago? – there amid the dust between the joists, her tremendous shock, crumbling voice and darting fingers

compelled her daughters to radiate towards her and fill her head with their voices and their concern. The trip to Prague was their idea. They coaxed her, and protected her; they tried to make it all right. But all she wanted was the peace and space to remember.

They were having an Indian summer in Cornwall. She smiled and leant a little further from her window, tasting the sweet, balmy air tinged with a tang of sea salt, watching the church tower bask in the afternoon light. In Krystof's language, September was *Září: the month that glows with colour*. How right he was. She kept his words alive, kept his memory bright. In the dark every night before she drifted off to sleep, the thoughts and words spinning through her head were in Czech.

It had been another warm day, the day of the haymaking at Pengared during the war, when she and Krystof had laughed deeply into each other's faces, their clothes stuck with seed heads, their eyes full of the low golden sun. He bent close to speak to her in his sing-song accent while the clack-clacking of Ted Cumberpatch's hay cutter pummelled their ears. Petals in the meadow rose like confetti. Krystof's scent and the vibration of his laughter sunk under her skin. And stayed there. That had been July. By the time September, *the month that glows with colour*, was over, he was gone.

'Mum? Are you OK?' Nancy walked in without knocking and eyed the unpacked suitcase on the floor, piles of clothes and an unfilled toiletry bag on the bed, the general melee of her mother's bedroom.

Rose kept her face to the window and the view of the church, willing treacherous tears to disappear and for her eyes to smile again.

'I'm fine,' she lied easily, picking up some knickers and throwing them into her case. 'There! Nearly done.'

Her daughter sighed without humour. She picked up her mother's pistachio-coloured cardigan from the bed, shook it out and began to refold it. 'I know how much you hate packing, so I thought I'd better check up on you. Dinner will be ready

soon. Lara's sauce is bubbling and the wine is breathing. Not sure if fricassee is right for such a warm evening, if you ask me.'

Nancy was a tall, handsome woman, who always knew better. She had strong, well-placed features and a habit of padding around the farmhouse at Pengared in one of her husband Mo's old shirts. Sensibly, once she'd hit forty, she cropped her thick dark hair into a choirboy style, although Rose thought it made her look like a beanpole.

Now Rose felt her daughter's dark, scrutinising stare.

'Look, Mum, are you sure about going to Prague? I'm beginning to think it's not such a good idea, going back after all these years at your age. You seem all of a muddle recently. You seem so distant. Finding Krystof's letters has been a real blow, hasn't it? I wonder if it isn't all a bit too much for you. I was only saying to Lara just now, have we been hasty . . . arranging it so soon? But it seemed such a good thing to do, with the Wall coming down, and everything. Are you really ready to go back there?'

Rose was unable to answer, her mind felt disabled. Trying to distance herself from the letters, the trip, Krystof, she asked after Nancy's mother-in-law: 'How's Betony? I haven't seen her for a while. Still cooking her wondrous meals?'

Nancy was baffled. 'Of course she is. And a good job too. Mo hates my cooking. I let her get on with it. There must be some advantages to living with your husband's mother. That's one anyway. Ah, I see you've managed to pack *something*.'

Nancy stooped to the case and picked up the bundle, wrapped carefully in her mother's silk scarf. Rose's hand rose in reflex, like a cat's paw, to grab it back. She stood rooted, seething, while Nancy sifted the flimsy envelopes in her hands.

'I see. You're waiting until you get to Prague before opening them. I don't know how you can bear it. Just think of what lies inside these letters. The truth, I suppose. I can't see why you won't just rip them open here and now.' There it was: that little piece of her father Will behind her eyes. *His* handsome eyes. The desire to control,

and then the panic when that control starts to slip. ‘Don’t you think you should open them now? Get it over with?’

‘Not at all.’

Rose could not look her daughter in the eye as she reached for the letters with a surprisingly steady hand. Cradling Krystof’s letters, so fragile, so *light*, she noticed how they were disintegrating at the folds, a little torn. *Like me*, she thought. His looping hand was off-centre, the inked postmark, *Praha 9 June 1946*, fading. Once again, her mind was lame. She could not bear to think. She wrapped them tenderly back up in the scarf and stowed them in a corner of her suitcase.

Nancy would not take her eyes off them. ‘I still can’t believe my father stole them. You reckon he took them from the old letterbox and hid them? I wonder what made him do it? I’m so sorry, Mum.’ Nancy sat on the bed with a flump, a great sigh rushing forth. Her large hand, as red and calloused as any self-respecting farmer’s wife’s should be, swept back through her cropped hair. ‘What a bastard.’

Rose was struck by how vulnerable her hard-faced Nancy was for a fleeting moment. She said, gently, ‘You have no need to apologise for something that man did. For someone you never knew. Something so long ago . . .’

She sat down at her dressing table, breathing a monumental sigh, catching Nancy’s eye in the mirror. It seemed far easier than face to face. ‘You’re right. I have always hated packing,’ she said lightly. ‘I feel so *useless*, packing. Drives me mad. I mean, this hairbrush . . .’ She picked it up and used it to smooth her bobbed grey hair behind her ears. ‘Should I pack it now? No. I will still need it in the morning. I can’t bear the boring minutiae of it all. Packing a suitcase always means an end of something. It means I have to *think*.’

‘Look, I’ll help you. I’ll do it for you.’ There it was, the controlling streak rising to the surface of Nancy’s skin: Will Bowman manifesting again, and again.

Rose flinched. ‘No, thank you, Nancy. I can manage. I am not feeble and decrepit yet. Even at *my* age.’

She turned once more to her reflection, and pondered. ‘What is it they say? You know you’re getting old the moment you look in the mirror and see your mother staring back at you.’

A sixty-seven-year-old woman was staring back at her. She saw a high forehead, softly lined, her features fading into one another, becoming less apparent. Her eyes – still as green as a cat’s – had kept their pretty almond shape, even if they were a little hooded. She was unable to wear eye make-up any longer but her hair was still glorious. Thick and glorious. Her land-girl friend Meg had once told her it was as red as a fox’s tail. An American GI had told her she was a real-life firecracker. Now, all the colour was gone, but the grey still glowed warm from the odd auburn hair that stayed with her and refused to leave.

She glanced out of the window at the turning season’s gilding of the countryside, blurred before her eyes. Now she was here, in the autumn of her life. Realisation hit her with a jolt of sadness: she had always thought that, by now, she’d be in Prague once again; living, laughing, loving. Walking beside Krystof across the Charles Bridge.

She shook away the image, telling Nancy, ‘But of course my mother never made it anywhere near this far. Poor dear Mother . . .’

Nancy was uncharacteristically quiet, her eyes softening momentarily in sympathy.

‘Well, the years are certainly passing,’ said Rose, rallying. ‘Look at my scar. I hardly notice it now. I’ve carried that round with me since I was seventeen. What’s that – fifty years! And now, good heavens, it’s all but faded away.’

Nancy peered over her mother’s shoulder at her reflection and shook her head.

Irritated, Rose said, ‘There, see? That crescent-shaped mark on my cheek.’

Nancy shrugged. ‘It’s so small I’ve never really noticed it. It’s always been part of your face. It’s not important, Mum.’

Rose pressed her lips together. Nancy didn’t know how wrong she was.

Lara called up the stairs, her voice reaching them like a snatch of tune. ‘Dinner’s ready, come on, you two.’

Nancy put her hand on her mother’s arm. On reflex, Rose drew away and then, ashamed, tried to make amends by leaning closer.

‘Before we go down,’ said Nancy, oblivious to her discomfort, ‘I just wanted to remind you that Cringle Cottage is always ready for you if you want it. If you want to leave this old place, put it all behind you, and start afresh. Don’t worry, it hasn’t been left to rack and ruin since Meg died. Mo’s been painting it. Whitewash everywhere. He’s fixed the roof and the chimney doesn’t smoke any more, he’s tested it.’

Rose glanced again out of her window, her eyes darting in protection of her thoughts, worried that Nancy would read them.

‘I like this house.’ There was the lie. ‘It’s been my home for so long . . .’

‘But Mum, this huge old place . . . the running costs, the heating bills. You’re rattling around in here. Oh, I know it’s lovely in the summer but . . .’

‘There was a time,’ Rose suddenly laughed, walking out of the bedroom, ‘when you couldn’t wait to get your hands on it. Both of you, seduced by the pictures in glossy magazines. Lara sorting out my kitchen and bathroom; putting in the roll-top bath. You doing up the hallway, fixing those floor tiles . . .’ They were now at the top of the landing looking down at the large square hallway below. The floor was Victorian mosaic in black, terracotta and cream.

‘And now you want me to leave it all behind,’ Rose chided.

‘We loved it as kids,’ mused Nancy. ‘This rambling old place with its cubbyholes and dusty corners: a perfect playground for us. But things are different now.’

‘But you never knew about—’ Rose stopped and shook her head. ‘Nothing,’ she said, forcing another laugh. Her daughters had never been aware of the chilling, draining emptiness of the rooms once their playing was over and they were tucked up in bed; the creeping loneliness that followed her solitary figure upstairs every night.

‘It’s just a thought, Mum,’ Nancy was saying. ‘After the shock of finding Krystof’s letters. We could put this place on the market; I’m sure you’d make a good

profit. Live in Cringle Cottage. You'd be five minutes from me, Mo and Betony, not half an hour's walk over the headland. It could be a project, keep you occupied.'

'At my age?' Rose tried to make a joke.

'On the market' meant surveyors, buyers, people who would prod and poke. The longer she held out, the less likely she'd have to face it. The longer she could protect her daughters, and herself. With Ted, his brother Hugh and now Meg gone, her secret remained with just herself and Betony.

'Don't know why,' said Nancy, standing at the top of the stairs, 'but I always feel uneasy walking around this landing. Maybe I fell as a child.' She stopped and her eyes burrowed into Rose's. 'Did I hurt myself? Did I fall down the stairs? There's something odd about it. Some strange memory. It's funny what lies buried in the subconscious, isn't it?'

Rose's hand gripped the banister. She dared not answer.

'Did I hear Nancy mention the *project*?' cried Lara, her bright face greeting them as she peered over her shoulder whilst energetically draining the veg over the sink. 'Don't you think Cringle Cottage is perfect for you, Mum? Keep talking, while I finish this. I don't want to miss out on anything.'

Rose stopped at the kitchen threshold, her spirit draining clean away, her eyes filled suddenly with Krystof's face. His deep-grey eyes now belonged to Lara, the joy for life that surrounded her like a halo was his. He was standing there: his face behind Lara's eyes. Even the way her fair fringe fell over her forehead.

'Nothing has been decided,' Rose said, her voice weary. 'One thing at a time, please, girls. My, that smells good, Lara. I can't wait.'

She felt them both back down; they knew not to press her.

'Go through to the dining room then,' Lara said cheerily, 'and I'll bring the starters.'

'Come here first,' Rose said, holding her arms open. 'Both of you,' she added quickly.

Her daughters stepped forward and she hugged them together. Why was she always struck by how unlike they were? What did she expect? Their fathers had been as different as heaven and hell. She had tried to bring them up as equals; tried not to have a favourite. But with Nancy, Rose's guilt worked its mischief in so many ways. The secret about her father, Will, which she would take to her grave, had built an invisible wall between them. Even now, married to Mo, the son of her old friends Betony and Ted, and living at the farm where she herself had once lived and worked, Nancy seemed as far away as ever.

In the kitchen, Nancy's embrace was stiff with pent-up frustration. Lara just fell into her arms, pressing her face into her mother's cheek.

'So, which area did you live in, Mum?' asked Lara as Nancy poured the coffee. They had cleared the dessert plates and continued to sit at the dining table, French windows open to the garden. Beyond the wall, the church shimmered like pewter as the sun went down.

Lara was leafing through a book open before her on the cloth. Rose stared at it, feeling her lip curl with distaste.

'What on earth is that?'

'The guidebook I bought,' Nancy answered, affronted. 'Of course, I'm pleased I arranged this trip when I did. It says in there that September is the best time to go, according to the weather graphs. Not too hot, not too cold. It will be good to go before the crowds descend. Just think, all those Warsaw Bloc countries opening up to us now. I think we'll be some of the first Westerners to get there since the Wall came down.'

Rose cringed at Nancy, who was being a know-all. 'I won't be needing a guidebook,' she said.

'But think how much has changed,' Nancy pressed on. 'We're talking nearly fifty years. The Communists booted out. The Prague we lived in then has all but disappeared.'

‘I hope to God some aspects of it have.’

‘Well, of course, all the important things will still be there: the Charles Bridge, the Old Town Square, that amazing astronomical clock,’ Nancy reeled off the tourist sites, ‘but the atmosphere will be different, the *people* will be. You forget that I can’t remember any of it. I will be discovering it for the first time for myself. I can’t tell you how helpful it’s been corresponding with those students at the university. They’re very interested in our case. When I last wrote they agreed to meet with us one afternoon, did I tell you?’

‘Our case . . .?’ Rose felt Nancy was racing ahead of her.

Lara, flicking through the book, raised her head. ‘I’m glad we’re going. This is just what I need.’ She looked at her mother. ‘Oh, I know the trip is for you, Mum, of course, but now my divorce has come through, I want to focus on myself and have a nice little holiday. It will help me forget a little, while hopefully it will help you remember.’

Rose was desperate to change the subject. ‘So, Lara, have you heard from Greg recently?’

‘No, which is a good thing,’ retorted Lara. ‘Last time I heard, he was still a shit. Anyway, I don’t want to talk about him. This is about us. And our quest . . . our case, as you put it, Nancy. Now let’s see, where is the university? Oh, I see, right by the river. I take it the students will help us find my father.’

Rose’s stomach balled up into a hard stone. She held her breath, trying to stop the eruption of a huge uncontrollable sob. Prague surfaced in her memory: bells rang out over the fairy tale spires and red-tiled roofs; the majestic castle presided from the top of the hill; the insides of churches dripped with gold; birds circled the river in the light of the setting sun. And then the deep-freeze of winter when the river lay cold and stiff under the arches of the Charles Bridge. The air did not touch her bare flesh for months and birds fell frozen from the sky.

She saw Lara’s face, struggling to show empathy, looming towards her.

‘What happened, Mum? Will we ever know? The letters will tell us, won’t they?’

Rose rested her head in her hands. They'd been through all this before. It was beginning to get her down.

Nancy shook her head at her sister.

'No, no, Lara's right, Nancy.' Rose sounded very old and very tired. 'I'll tell you what I remember. The letters can wait.' She took a deep breath. 'Krystof's house was opposite a monastery in the *Stare Mesto*, the Old Town.' She waited as Lara eagerly turned pages, tracing columns of text with her finger. 'It was a tall house. Built of stone. Crumbling stucco. Truly beautiful, faded and grand. It had been in Krystof's family for a century at least.'

'How many floors?' asked Lara.

She counted on her fingers ' . . . three, four. But we had to give them up to the Communists. They put us in the attic. Crammed in we were: Krystof, Babička, Nancy and me.'

'Oh, Babička! The old lady,' cried Nancy. 'How funny that I should suddenly remember her. She was Krystof's granny, wasn't she?'

'I wonder what else you will remember?' said Rose. 'We were there for less than a year, you know; you were very young. You had your second birthday there in June 1946, just before we left.'

Nancy swept her pensive eyes over the photographs in the guidebook. 'I keep having snippets . . .' she said, 'flashes in my head, just like with the landing here at home. I remember there were a lot of stairs in the house in Prague. And in my mind, narrow streets. And Babička; she had rather large, wrinkly hands and long white hair. I also remember crying . . . the cold.'

Rose swallowed hard. 'Do you remember Krystof?'

Nancy wrinkled her nose. 'Hardly. Hardly at all.'

'He was a father to you.'

For less than a year. That's all we had.

Nancy was blunt, defensive. 'I don't remember.'

Rose was incensed. Nancy was quick to apologise, when she didn't have to, for her father's own cruelty and madness. For someone she never knew. But she would show no contrition for not remembering Krystof.

To distract herself from her anger, Rose looked over at Lara.

'You've taken to wearing your hair in a ponytail.'

'Do you like it?' Lara flicked her hair. 'Since my divorce, since I got rid of Greg, I want to feel young again.'

Rose said, 'It's just how you wore it as a child. What traumas we had, trying to get a brush through it.'

Her ponytail would swing behind Lara as she ran, Rose remembered. Every day, she had wanted Krystof to see his daughter run; her hair bouncing; her smile a mirror of his.

Am I the only person, apart from Betony, left alive who remembers him? thought Rose with a jolt. She looked at her two daughters who were both waiting on her every word, eager to hear more about their life in Prague.

'The Communists were taking over,' she went on. 'It began to get dangerous, and, soon after your second birthday, Nancy, Krystof and I decided we had to leave. You know all this. I don't see why I have to go over it all again.'

'But you've never really told us. Not properly,' persisted Lara, not hearing the warning crack in her mother's voice. 'Why didn't Krystof come with you?'

Rose rested her thumping forehead on the coolness of her hand, shielding her eyes, which were screwed up tight with pain. She whispered, 'He couldn't. He simply couldn't.'

Rose could not sleep. Usually the night sounds of Trelewin soothed her, but tonight she lay with her eyes wide open against the darkness. In the silence of her bedroom she listened to the small hours marked by the chimes of the church clock and Krystof's voice saying over and over, '*Ruzena*, I will follow.'

She replied, '*Následujte mě* . . . follow me.'

Three years ago, she had watched the Wall come down on the evening news. She saw the joyful people jumping on graffiti-splashed chunks of mortar; she saw their ecstasy and their open arms as, like a surging tide, Easterners piled through the gaps. She wondered and dared to hope. Now he will contact me. He knows where I am. He must reach me here.

But she didn't know that his letters had already reached her and had been sleeping – crumbling – for forty-six years under her floorboards. He might phone, she had thought. Funny to think they had never spoken on the telephone. His voice. Oh, to hear his voice again. She could not remember it.

The bedroom window was open and right at the edge of her senses, the waves of Trelewin cove below were breaking and receding on the sand. She found herself smiling in the darkness, remembering how Krystof had never been able to fathom the beauty of the sea, how he had marvelled at its vastness, its freedom. How he had cried with joy that it existed.

She knew what she would do with his letters. Once they had got their taxi from the airport into Prague; once they had been dropped off at the hotel, unpacked and had a light refreshment; once her daughters had consulted the guidebook and decided what to do first, she would leave them. She would take a tram to the river. She'd find a spot where she could see the Charles Bridge downstream. Perhaps she would watch the water tumble over the weir, or count the statues on the parapets. Then she would fight her cold fear and bury it deep inside. She'd take the bundle of letters and gently unwrap them. She'd take her life in her hands. Using her handbag-sized magnifying glass, she would carefully check each postmark, check each date. And one by one, in the order that Krystof sent the letters and in the order that Will Bowman concealed them, she would slit each envelope open and read . . . and read . . . and read.

She drifted, holding on to that rare glimmer of anticipation in the darkness. Her fear fading. At last, the truth . . . their truth.

A tap on the door, gentle at first. She thought she was dreaming. But then it grew urgent. Rap rap rap. The bedroom door opened.

‘What? What is it?’ she hoisted herself upright against her pillows. ‘Is that you, Nancy?’ Of course it wasn’t Nancy; Nancy never knocked.

‘No, it’s me.’ Lara’s tall, slim figure in a white nightie slipped into the room, quickly shutting the door behind her.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Oh, Mum, I can’t bear it. Switch your light on. Switch it on!’

Rose fumbled in the dark.

‘Please, switch it *on*!’

‘Lara, whatever . . .?’ She peered at her daughter as the sharp light from the bedside lamp hit her.

Lara was panting, her rosebud mouth the shape of an ‘O’. Her grey eyes, Krystof’s grey eyes, wide and tearful. Her blonde hair fell over her face, shielding her, but Rose saw and smelt tension, and fear.

‘Lara, it’s two o’clock in the morning. Whatever is the matter?’

Lara was hiding something behind her back. She bit her lip as she carefully brought her hand round, clutching what looked like an old stained towel. The towel was wrapped around something dead and heavy. She placed it on her mother’s lap and it sank into the bedclothes.

‘Lara?’

‘You tell me what it’s doing here. I can’t believe it was there, right there in the cupboard.’

‘Why were you looking in your cupboard at this time of night?’

‘I wasn’t. It was earlier. Just before I was going to sleep. I wanted to find my old walking boots to take with me. The cobbles of Prague are hard on one’s feet, apparently. Instead of my boots I found this disgusting thing. I haven’t slept at all. Mum, what’s it *doing* here?’

Rose picked up a corner of the towel and carefully pulled it to one side. The weight of the object sat between her knees. It felt vaguely familiar to her, like the weight of someone’s hand. Willing her tired eyes to focus, she pressed her fingertips

into the towel and found cool metal. She ran them along the length of it until she touched the smooth wooden handle, her finger alighting on the trigger.

‘It’s Krystof’s gun,’ she breathed. ‘Oh, God, I’d forgotten . . . since you girls left home, I have just shut doors and left things to the dust and mice. Oh, Lara. What a shock for you. I’m so sorry.’

‘But what’s it doing in the cupboard?’ Lara shrieked, shivering by Rose’s bed.

‘I doubt it’s loaded,’ Rose said, remembering, with a thrill of pleasure, the crack of the bullets as she fired them off one by one. She gazed down at the pistol as if it was an old friend: a Model 24, standard Czech armed forces issue. It was quite a dinky thing: a short, fat muzzle of dull metal, a gleaming wooden handle. It used to fit in the palm of Krystof’s hand, and it slipped inside his coat pocket with ease.

‘You’ve got to get rid of it!’ hissed Lara.

A strange, sweeping lethargy filled Rose’s limbs. She touched the pistol tenderly. ‘You know, Lara,’ she whispered, ‘I am so sorry about this. Of course, I knew the gun was here, somewhere in this house, but it had slipped my mind, like a lot of things do these days. Yes, it is a horrid thing. But believe me, Lara, it means a lot to me. It was the last thing your father touched.’

‘You mean, he really *is* dead? He died using it. Did someone shoot him? Was he shot dead?’

‘No, no . . . what I meant to say was: he had been carrying the gun . . . before we parted. I can’t explain to you . . .’ Her eyes slipped sideways to Krystof standing on Prague station concourse as her train pulled away.

‘But it’s a *gun*. And you’re just sitting there!’

Rose was weary. ‘Lara, I can’t get worked up over this. I can’t let myself. I have been through so much that the sight of this gun right now is really not having an effect on me. Not the horror that you expect me to feel. I’m sorry about that.’

She watched her daughter’s open, incredulous face close down with fear.

‘Well, you must be made of concrete then,’ Lara snapped.

‘Maybe I am.’ Rose wrapped the pistol back up in its grubby towel. ‘Tomorrow, before we leave, I’m going to take this thing and throw it into the sea.’

‘Good.’

‘But for now, it is going in the bin.’ She reached out and tossed Krystof’s gun into her waste-paper basket.

Temporarily satisfied, Lara retreated to the door. ‘Do I tell Nancy?’

‘Do what you like.’

On this, Lara returned and sat by her mother’s feet.

‘You’re so calm, Mum. I don’t understand.’

‘I don’t either. Concrete, you see.’ She managed a smile. Inside her chest her heart was turning itself inside out, and her agony was beginning to register on her face. She could barely manage to keep her voice smooth and motherly. ‘But right now, Lara, you are going to sleep, and so am I. We have a long day tomorrow.’

Lara glanced towards the waste-paper basket. ‘I don’t know how you can sleep with that thing in your bedroom.’

Rose looked at her daughter in sorrow. *You don’t know your mother at all*, she thought.

She said, ‘Goodnight, Lara.’

Lara crept towards the door. ‘You don’t have to throw it into the sea, Mum. Not if it was the last thing my father touched.’

Rose switched off her light and lay in the darkness listening to her thoughts: ‘*Skutečný* . . . and *skutečný* . . .’ and marvelling at how the words for truth and reality were the same in Czech.

A light aircraft droned across the sky. She stared towards her bedroom ceiling, imagining the plane’s flight as it passed overhead in deep darkness, unusually low on its path along the Cornish coast to Plymouth airport. She was grateful to the unknown pilot for breaking in and stopping unpleasant thoughts from spiralling

towards unimaginable horror, the horror, truth and reality that she was keeping from her daughters and from herself.

But then her concrete heart tripped over its beat and the sound of the plane's engine turned a fresh page in her memory.

Planes in the sky, flying a steady path. Planes in the sky, a whole squadron. Planes in the sky, a bank of them seven miles wide, like a great storm approaching. Sharp-eyed navigators looking down on the English countryside, at the line of the coast and the treacherous, white breaking waves. Planes in the sky over Plymouth docks: battle-black, shiny nosed Dormiers with a heavy cargo to offload.

And there she was, down in the street. Tiny Rose, trapped by the rain of bombs, trapped by the fire; trapped in the air raid with Will Bowman.

She sank deeper into her bed, helpless to the memory, wretched with it all.

The night of the raid was the night that changed everything; changed the truth; changed the reality of what Rose Pepper was to become.