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Chapter 1

~ THE OLD LEAN-TO ~

Christopher wandered along the old white slabs of the flagstone path. He wanted to escape to another place and time, far away from the madness of the past few months. He did not recognise his life anymore. Despite its size, his grandmother's house had become like a prison to him, where he was being punished by the memories of happier times. Milaw House itself had not changed, but Christopher felt the coldness now: an aching presence that crept from room to room. It seemed to follow him wherever he went. The only relief was being outside in the fresh air, standing in the huge garden where he had spent most of his early childhood.

The sun drooped lower in the sky and the first chill of autumn danced its way through the air. Despite the coldness, Christopher felt an unexpected warmth reach out to him. It seemed to be emanating from the lavender plants beside the garden wall. Their tiny lilac petals were alive in the breeze, beckoning to him, begging him to come closer. He had played at this part of the garden for as far back as he could remember, but never before had Christopher experienced this kind of sensation. He was mesmerised. With his finger, he traced the outline of the violet petals. For the first time, in a long time, he felt at peace. He absorbed every detail of the garden, thinking that it was unusual for the lilac buds to be still very much in bloom at this late stage in the year. As he embraced the soothing scent of lavender, he recalled the day he sat outside in the bright April sunshine with his mother. Christopher could still hear her voice clearly, telling him all about the healing quality of the amethyst coloured plants. It was as if his mother knew almost everything about anything. That was just one of the things that he loved

about her, and it was certainly what made her everyone's favourite teacher at Ferncross Primary School.

Before he knew it, Christopher had hypnotically drifted towards the old white shed at the bottom of the garden. His grandmother – his Nana Kathy - had warned him so many times *don't go near that shabby lean-to!* But he could not help it. There was something drawing him in. As he ran his fingers across the worn slats of wood, specks of paint sailed slowly through the air, like white powder magically drifting through endless time, before settling into silence at the bottom of some wonderful old snow globe. Christopher thought that the lean-to must be as ancient as Milaw house itself; it was a miracle that both had survived two world wars. That was hard to believe looking at it now: one more gust of wind and surely it would be no more. He could vaguely recall his grandfather pottering about in the shed, mending old lawnmowers; sadly, it was now a mere husk and his Nana Kathy had locked the door many years ago.

Suddenly, something caught Christopher's attention. Although countless spiders had decorated the shed's ancient window with their silken labyrinths, he could just make out a ghostly white apparition. Through the panes of glass, two piercing azure coloured eyes stared at him. Goosebumps crawled over every inch of Christopher's skin. He knew that his Nana would be furious with him, but he just had to find out who - or *what* - was looking at him!

The light August breeze waltzed through air again, sending the heavenly scent of lavender in his direction, nudging him towards the lean-to door. Nervously, Christopher wrapped his hand around the rusting doorknob and turned it with all his might. Nothing. He tried it again, but this time he leaned against the door with his shoulder. Still nothing. The door just would not budge. It was going to be impossible to open it without the key.

Then something magical happened: the autumnal zephyr exhaled from above once more, through the garden, along the path and down to the old lean-to.

The door creaked slowly open.

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Chapter 2

~ THE WHITE HORSE ~

What on earth? Christopher thought, wiping disbelief from his eyes. It all seemed like some strange dream, but it looked like someone had deliberately pushed the door open as if to invite him inside. Suddenly, a shadow flickered from deep within the darkness. Christopher could just make out the silhouette of a small hand waving back and forth. Like a moth to a flame, he was helplessly pulled towards its haunting iridescence. A chill crawled up his spine. He could hear his heart pounding noisily in his ears. Christopher rubbed his eyes again in a hopeless attempt to clear the vision of this creepy apparition. But *it* was still there. Now the thin ghost like index finger moved repeatedly to and fro, like a little hook drawing him in. He tried to resist, but it was useless.

“H...h...h...hello?” Christopher stammered. He tried to say something else, but his mouth was mummified with fear. He could almost hear his Nana shouting at the top of her wee lungs - *it's dangerous son – keep oot!* But he just had to see what was inside. He swallowed down the lump of terror at the back of his throat, then ever so carefully he stepped inside the old lean-to.

Christopher's heart hammered painfully against his ribs. He felt like he was going to faint. He scrambled for the light switch, but there was no need. Sunlight shimmered through the misty panes of glass and thankfully its glow replaced the unwelcome darkness. Time stood still. Every ancient artefact seemed to hang suspended in the air, as if Christopher had interrupted some splendid celebration. The shelves were adorned with all manner of bric-a-brac: books, paintings, glass jars and board games of some decade past. In the corner lay an old gramophone with its records propped at the side. One object was still very

much in motion: a white horse, rocking slowly back and forth, as if its jockey had leapt off merely seconds before. It actually appeared to be smiling at Christopher.

Another shaft of sunlight danced through the glass, catching the lustre of the horse's sapphire like eyes. Christopher was in awe. He smiled and whispered "*you are m...magnificent. Thanks for leading me h...here*". He laid his hand upon the horse's saddle and felt an all-encompassing warmth wrap around him, causing his fear and anxiety to melt away. He forgot all about the impending horror of starting a new school; a miraculous thing given that only fifteen minutes ago he had burst out of Milaw house in search of some calming fresh air. These surges of panic had been sneaking up on him too much recently and he could not find the words to tell anyone about how he really felt. It all did not seem to matter so much now, standing inside this wonderful old relic. Christopher felt hypnotised being surrounded by such enchanting objects. He no longer felt alone. It was almost as if something, *or someone*, was trying to talk to him, to tell him their story.

The snowy steed continued to rock back and forth, but his momentum had slowed a little. Christopher was struck by how perfect the horse looked. It appeared to be made of solid oak and everything about it suggested that it had vaulted straight out of Victorian times. Temptation clutched at Christopher: it grasped his foot, placed it in one of the leather stirrups and helped him onto the trusted steed. Even though he knew he was too old to be sitting atop a timber horse, and the mere sight would cause him to be the laughingstock of his peers, Christopher could not help it. He felt like a king. As he grappled for the golden reins, he noticed a line of jaunty words inscribed into the wood.

Decemuir sacrorum libri.

There was something familiar about the strange inscription: Christopher was certain that he had seen it somewhere before. He placed his fingers over the deep

lines of the letters. Suddenly, an overpowering current shot through his body, throwing him from the horse. A flash of white danced in front of his eyes.

When Christopher's vision returned, he discovered that he was lying crumpled on the floor. To his amazement though, there was no pain. He felt fine. In fact, he felt like cheering. And then he thought of his Nana. He was sure that his tumultuous clamour would have disturbed her, but the image of his Nana Kathy stomping down the path in her fluffy slippers made him laugh aloud.

Dammit, what's wrong with me? Christopher thought, trying hard to stifle his merriment. He lay on the floor, as still as his body would allow, hoping that his laughter would dissolve into nothing. But then he caught sight of the magic again and his belly summersaulted: the contents of the old lean-to appeared to float enchantingly in the air.

Creak – creak – creak – creak.

The silvery white horse gathered momentum again but there was no one sitting on his saddle. Christopher watched his pendulum like movement and followed the direction of his muzzle. It seemed to be pointing in the direction of a wooden box, on the shelf just below the window. He gingerly scrambled to his feet and crept towards the box.

The timeworn metal latch clicked open easily and Christopher pushed the lid up as far as it would go. A sprig of lavender rested on top of layers of yellowish, crumpled newspapers. The lilac scent drifted through air and warmed his very soul. Carefully, Christopher placed the lavender spray to the side and proceeded to pull out the scrunched-up balls of print. He noticed the date on one: *Tuesday 8th September 1959*. Not being one for history though, he put it aside and thought nothing more about it. Something far more interesting caught his attention. Underneath the layers of newspaper, Christopher found a wooden bound manuscript. On the front cover, the title *The Book of Almost Anything* was ornately engraved. He

lifted the book from its wooden box and placed it on the shelf. At the bottom of the box lay a very decorative looking pen. Christopher had never seen anything like it in his life: it was encased in mother of pearl and its aurum nib looked like the beak of a majestic golden eagle. It had the initials *T. M.* engraved on the lid.

Christopher thought immediately of his grandfather, Thomas Muir. Although his Papa Tommy died when Christopher was only seven, he could still remember him vividly. He had played such an important part in his childhood. Memories resonated into life: he could recall sitting in the huge reception room in Milaw House, alongside his Papa, tinkering on the keys of the upright piano. His important job was to press the low C note when instructed, whilst his Papa graced the piano keys with his version of “Chopsticks”.

The music faded along with the memory.

Christopher found himself holding the pen tightly between his thumb and index finger. He felt as though the pen had a story to tell, as if it was looking for something to bring its tale to life. Automatically, as if he had been commanded to, he opened the wooden bound book. The pages fell open at a page called *Sam*. Underneath the title, lay a magical story about a white Siberian husky. Christopher immediately became engrossed in the story: Sam was a wonderful dog with a loyal, loving heart, and deep blue eyes. The dog’s story was spellbinding. As he read on, Christopher felt compelled to touch the words on the page, as though he was reading braille and it was the only way he would understand. Every expression about Sam and his young owner Tom appeared to leap out of the page and inject life into Christopher. He felt so alive and excited. Something magical was happening.

Then the story stopped.

Christopher yearned for another chapter, paragraph, sentence, word or even letter. The story could not stop there. Without thinking, he brought the nib of the pen to

the paper and continued the *Story about Sam*. The words miraculously just appeared on the page, as if someone else was writing the tale. He could not believe it. Then the story changed: *Sam became Christopher's trusted dog and he followed him wherever he went*. Christopher had always wanted a dog, so the story naturally fell out onto the paper. From that moment on, *Sam slept at the bottom of Christopher's bed and chased away any of his nightmares or painful lingering memories. Sam and Christopher were inseparable*.

And then the story stopped. Again.

However, this time it was because Christopher had been interrupted by a scratching at the lean-to door. The hand of fear scuttled across the floor and scarpers up his spine. The scratching became more frantic. Christopher's heart leapt up from his chest and a mumbling whimper escaped from his mouth. He felt as if he was going to scream. But he thought of his father and how he would have been *incredibly ashamed of such feeble actions!* So, Christopher tried to *be a man*, in the emotionless way that his father would have commanded.

Christopher walked ever so slowly towards the rickety door. The clawing seemed louder and more aggressive. He gulped down what he thought would be the last breath of air he would ever experience. He opened the door.

Out of nowhere, a beautiful white dog darted forward, jumped up and knocked Christopher to his knees. As the dog greeted him with slobbering kisses, a glint of sunlight twinkled on its collar.

The dog was called Sam.

CHAPTER 3

~ SAM THE SIBERIAN ~

Still on his knees, Christopher found himself staring into the beautiful blue eyes of the Siberian husky. He struggled to think logically, trying to dismiss the fantastical idea that he had somehow conjured up this wonderful snow-white dog called Sam. Was he just daydreaming? After all, his father was always criticising him for having *such an overactive imagination!* In the small village of Ferncross, everybody knew everything about anything, and so just about every pet was accounted for. It would also have been exceedingly difficult for anyone - or *anything* - to have crept by the eagle eyes of Nana Kathy. The more Christopher thought rationally about it, the more his original but outrageous idea seemed to make sense.

By this point, the striking Siberian had stopped adorning Christopher with slavering kisses; instead, he appeared to be listening to his new master's every thought. The dog's cerulean eyes were spellbinding. Christopher could *actually feel* the dog's paw firmly on his hand.

"*You are real*", he whispered to the beautiful, white dog. Then, just like before, Christopher was embraced with a reassuring warmth. He felt as if this wonderful dog called Sam was sent from somewhere, as if he was meant to be Christopher's protector. Surely his Nana Kathy would understand. Surely, she would see that Sam was just the friend that Christopher had been yearning for ever since the loss of his mother. Surely, she would allow Sam to stay with them.

For as long as he could remember, his grandparents did not own any pets, but that did not stop them from being animal lovers. The garden of Milaw house was always bustling with life, from foxes to squirrels to hedgehogs even. Nana Kathy also loved taking care of her *wee feathered friends*,

as she liked to call them; whatever the weather, she was always out filling up their little seed trays. This was just another one of the reasons why Christopher loved the garden so much. He looked at Sam and smiled, but at the same time he swallowed down his concern. He could almost hear his Nana's answer of *No son – and that's my final decision.*

If only looking after this huge bundle of white energy was as easy as tending to the little robins in the garden.

Christopher clambered to his feet and brushed the dust from his knees. He glanced around the interior of the old lean-to, checking that nothing had been broken or shunted out of its place. Thankfully, everything seemed fine, except for the old gramophone: its horn appeared to have swivelled round and it was now pointing towards Christopher. *It must have moved in all my calamity,* he thought. But when Christopher moved forward to push the cone back into its place, he noticed that there was an old shellac disc already in position in the turntable. *That's odd,* Christopher thought, as he stared at the strangely immaculate looking record. There did not appear to be a single scratch on the surface. Not even a speck of dust.

Sam nuzzled at his hand and awoke Christopher from his bemusement. He looked down and smiled again at his newly found friend. Then Sam nestled his nose again against Christopher's right hand. It was like Sam was encouraging his young master.

"A...a...and wh...why not?!" Christopher stammered aloud with excitement. Before he knew it, his hand found the arm of the old gramophone. He began winding it with all his might. The dynamic action caused a stir in the old lean-to, and every object in the room came alive again. Christopher stumbled backwards as the stylus slipped down onto the record's intricate spirals. A harmony of wonderful soft strings filled the air.

If they ask me, I could write a book...

The voice filled the air. The soothing sonorous words sounded so familiar to Christopher. Sinatra. Of course, it

was a Frank Sinatra; one of his Papa Tommy's favourite singers. The music and words swirled through the air, grasping a hold of Sam and Christopher.

I could write a preface on how we met, so the world would never forget...

Normally, this would have all seemed so ridiculous, and Christopher would certainly have been laughed at by any number of his so-called friends back in Leicester, but to be dancing foot to paw with a Siberian husky called Sam, in time to Frank Sinatra, seemed to be exactly the normality that Christopher had been looking for.

And the simple secret of the plot, is just tell them that I love you a lot...

Christopher stopped dancing. The words of the chorus resonated through to his very soul. Sam's prancing about also halted. They both stood motionless, listening to the soothing lyrics.

"A...a...am I losing m...my m...mind?" Christopher stuttered to Sam, as the stylus reached the end of the song. The silence brought back the reality of the afternoon's events, and it began to weigh down upon him. Exhausted, he slumped onto the dusty floor. Sam, sensing his dismay, curled up in front of his newly found master and began lapping his hand as an offer of comfort.

"I...if I am l...losing my m...mind, then why do you s...seem so real Sam?" The dog let out a little howl, as if he was trying to reassure Christopher that he was, in fact, sane.

"CHRISTOPHER!?"

Suddenly, Sam and Christopher were interrupted by the recognisable Scottish call of Nana Kathy from somewhere at the top of the garden. Christopher scrambled to his feet and stood at the door of the lean-to.

Now I am really, really for it, he thought. Sam was behind him, nudging him out of the lean-to and into the garden.

"I'll b...be there in a m...minute Nana. I h...have m...m...missed you. J...just coming!" Christopher shouted, trying to cover up the strangled panic in his voice.

He thought that his forced but composed reply would buy him an extra five minutes. So, he quickly rootled back inside the old shed to cover up the unbelievable events of the afternoon.

Of course, the book ... how stupid am I? Christopher thought. He carefully picked up *The Book of Almost Anything* and placed it back inside the old newspaper wrappings. He laid the lavender on top and shut the lid of the box. However, he kept his Papa's pen. He wanted to keep a hold of it for a while longer, just to prove to himself that the events of the afternoon had indeed taken place. He took one last look at contents of the shed and ran his hand over the wooden mane of the rocking horse.

"And you're coming with me. I don't care about the consequences!" Christopher said to Sam effortlessly, without any of his usual stuttering. Sam looked up at his young master adoringly. He was oh so grateful that he was not going to be left behind in the old shed.

As they stepped outside, and onto the old flagstone path, a heavenly force exhaled from above and sent its breath towards the lean-to, gracefully blowing the old door back into its place, causing the latch to shut.

Christopher and Sam began the dread filled journey towards the back door of Milaw house. With every step, he could feel his heart sink lower than the fading sunlight. Even though he knew his Nana Kathy's response would not be the one he wanted, he reached down and grabbed Sam's collar tightly.

"You're mine Sam. And I am keeping you. No matter what".

Sam's fluffy white tail thumped in agreement against the back of Christopher's legs. Yet again, his stutter had momentarily vanished, without him even realising it.

When they reached the back door, Nana Kathy appeared with a huge blue bowl in her hands. Her face lit up when she saw Christopher.

"There you are son! I was about to send a search party

oot for you.” And then she placed a dish of meat down into the garden.

The name on the bowl was Sam.

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CHAPTER 4

~ INCAENDIUM~

Christopher played with the carrots on his plate. He did not feel hungry; he was too busy staring out into the back porch where Sam was sleeping. The fluffy Siberian was enjoying the last of the late afternoon sunshine. Christopher sat without eating a mouthful of food, trying to process the afternoon's events. He could not understand why Nana Kathy was behaving like everything was just "normal". What made things even more confusing was that everywhere Christopher looked, doggy paraphernalia lay, which suggested that Sam the Siberian was a long-established member of the Muir family.

Christopher almost laughed out loud at how ridiculous it all seemed. *This has got to be a dream*, he thought. However, he was too scared to say anything to his Nana Kathy about the appearance of his Siberian husky called Sam. He could almost hear his Nana say, *you've lost your marbles!*

"Whit's wrong son, are you not hungry?" Nana Kathy clucked over her grandson, placing her hand over his forehead to check his temperature. "You've no fever, but you look a wee bitty flushed. What's the matter?"

"I...I...eh, I'm ...j...just thinking about s...starting school. I guess I am a little b...bit worried about it. Do you m...mind if I leave dinner until l...later. I think I n...need a walk."

Before his Nana could respond, the doorbell rang sharply. The harsh sound disturbed Sam from his sleep. He stretched out all four limbs and padded through to the kitchen to where Christopher was and flopped down at his feet. Nana Kathy had already vanished, presumably to answer the door. Even though she was in her winter years, she had an amazing talent for disappearing and then reappearing, as if she had magically teleported from one end

of the house to the other.

Christopher instantly recognised his father's rumbling voice resonating over the top of his Nana Kathy's hushed tones. Although he could not make out what she was saying, he knew that she was not happy to see him. His father, Aidan Brenton, was a powerful man and he knew it. Christopher always felt as if he did not really know his father at all. As a chief executive officer at Incaendum, a global computer and mobile communications company, Aidan Brenton had never been much of a father figure in Christopher's life. Before his parents' divorce and his mother's passing, he could only ever recall his father arriving home late at night, long after his mother had tucked him into bed. Latterly, he would pretend that he had fallen asleep; in truth, he was lying wide awake, listening for the click of his father's key in the front door. This was almost always followed by unpleasant exchanges between his parents, which usually ended with his poor mother in tears. The tension in the old Leicester town house seemed to swallow up every morsel of air; a choking, stifling presence that left Christopher bereft of any happy memories of his father. No matter how hard he tried, he could not think of his dad in a positive light. Sure, he was an extremely wealthy man, and he did financially provide for Christopher and his mother, but it all seemed to be in the name of something. If there were ever any problems, Aidan Brenton would merely throw money at it. But all Christopher ever wanted was his father to read him a bedtime story.

Perhaps though, most of all, Christopher wanted his father to take more care of his mother.

"What have I told you about slouching whilst eating your dinner!"

The suddenness of his father's voice startled Christopher and made him almost leap from his seat. Sam quickly stood up beside him and let out a disapproving growl.

"You will end up with a curved spine and a crooked

neck!”

“Enough Aidan! Christopher is no’ bothering anyone. This is my hoose and I make the rules. So, Christopher can slouch when eating dinner, whether you like it or no’.” Nana Kathy could cut quite a punch when she wanted to, and her words thankfully stopped Christopher’s father from continuing his rant.

“Hi D...Dad”, Christopher mumbled awkwardly as he hesitantly stepped forward to give his father a hug.

Instead, Mr Brenton pulled back from his son and offered his hand for what felt more like a formal business greeting. Christopher uncomfortably engaged in his father’s handshake, but instantly regretted it.

“Your grip is weak Christopher; you need to man up! In the world of business, your handshake means everything. It tells people what kind of man you are.”

“Aidan! Please leave my grandwean alone.”

Christopher was ever so grateful for his Nana’s input at this point in this awkward – and very unexpected – family reunion. Aiden Brenton shifted from one foot to another, as if he was trotting on the spot.

“Whit is it you are here for anyway? You’ve no seen your son for over three weeks, so you’ve got a bloomin’ cheek to just appear and then try to behave like his faither!”

Mr Brenton ignored Nana Kathy’s question. Instead, he placed his black leather suitcase on the table and clicked open the gold latches. Inside, there were several important looking documents all brandishing the Incaendum logo: the head of a black stag head with the letter “I” emblazoned at its centre. He put the papers aside, pulled out a little red box and then offered it to Christopher.

“There you go. You are now the proud owner of Incaendum’s latest mobile phone. You will be the envy of everyone.”

Christopher took the slim rectangular box from the hands of his father and stammered a very weak sounding “th...thanks”. He was amazed how feeble his voice always

appeared to sound in the presence of his father. It made his stutter even worse. Sam lifted his nose and sniffed the box, but quickly whipped his muzzle away. He snarled at Aiden Brenton, baring his teeth.

“Ahem. If I could continue?” Mr Brenton jibed. “When you set up the phone, you will notice that it has a first-class navigation and pairing device. This means that you can pair the phone to my phone, and we can literally see where we both are at any time. I will also see – and hear – *everything* that you do.”

“Bloomin’ cheek!” Nana Kathy interrupted. “You mean you can earwig in on Christopher’s conversation and boss him around!” By this point, she appeared to be more than flustered, and the little lavender tints in her white hair almost appeared to turn a shade of crimson red.

“Th...thanks D...D...Da...” Christopher could not finish his sentence. He felt like he was suffocating. He needed to escape again. The heat was too much.

“Right Aidan, enough.” Thankfully, Nana Kathy cut in again, just in time to save her grandson. “Christopher will do whatever later. But for the now, just leave the wee soul alone. He was just about to go for a wee walk.” Nana Kathy hoped that Mr Brenton would take the hint and leave. It was all becoming too much, and she could feel the effect he was having on her blood pressure. Sam could sense her pain, so padded over to her side, nuzzling his cold nose into the heat of her palms.

“Ha ha ha!” Mr Brenton laughed slowly and malevolently. “I almost forgot, Kathy, how little – *or should I say wee* – everything seems to you.” Mr Brenton’s words were laced with scorn. “But this is no insignificant matter.” He paused and then stared straight at Christopher. “Do not forget. Link your mobile to mine. Firstly, you must look straight into the camera so that it can scan your retinae. After that, the phone will tell you what to do...”

The technical jargon and harsh tones spewing from Aiden Brenton’s mouth caused such an aching thump in

Christopher's brain. He felt a thousand voices scream out to him, telling him to leave, telling him to run far away from this man who was supposed to be his father. Time stopped ticking. Christopher found himself standing face to face with a man he no longer recognised. Fire and heat raged behind the eyes of this familiar stranger. It was a choking, agonizing heat; one that grasped tightly around Christopher's chest, squeezing all the oxygen from his lungs. The room was ablaze with crimson and amber. Angry flames lashed and whipped around him, like a lion stalking its prey, hemming him in on all sides. The flames whipped higher and higher, until their painful licks culminated into a high-pitched frequency shrieking in his ears. Christopher gasped for air. He held his hands over his ears and screamed "NOOOOOOOOOO!"

The hands of time stirred, and the seconds moved forward.

"And for Dicken's sake, stop daydreaming!" Aiden Brenton shouted at his son.

Whether it was the strident force of his father's words, or the heat that still appeared to slap at his face, Christopher suddenly rushed out of the kitchen, with Sam following loyally behind him. He could not even find the words to say goodbye to his father. Tears prickled in eyes.

As he was pulling his jacket on in the hallway, his Nana appeared behind him. "Don't you take any notice of your so-called father. He's just a very angry man. You're doing so well son, especially after everything that's happened to you. Your mother, my dear wee Peggy, would be so proud of you."

Nana Kathy then hugged her grandson lovingly and wiped away his tears. Her energy was so calming; it was just what Christopher needed in the aftermath of his father's presence. Sam was already at the front door, wagging his thick white tail, waiting patiently on his master to take him for a walk.

Outside, the air felt unusually frosty, but it was a welcome relief to the inferno that had been building inside Milaw house. At that moment, Christopher felt that every fibre of his body was repelled by the presence of his father. At that moment, he hated him, loathed him even, as if he was everything that Christopher was not. At that very moment, he was not even sure if Aiden Brenton was actually his father. However, Sam's cooling nose suddenly brought Christopher to his senses, and the memory of his mother's words replaced his anger: *bate and anger are hot coals. Let go. The longer you hold onto them, the more they scald your hands.*

Christopher smiled. He inhaled the surprising soothing coolness of the air, allowing it to calm his racing heart. He looked upwards and smiled at the little swallows as they graced the sky with their late summer evening dance. Sam was fascinated by their high-flying antics and pulled Christopher forward. Laughter pushed the two chums even further, so much so that the two of them started running. Christopher sang loudly like the little feathered friends in the sky. They chirruped along Acacia Drive, until they reached the brook at the end of the road where the two of them stopped to catch their breath. Christopher was too busy ruffling the thick fur between Sam's ears to notice the beautiful vision walking towards him. It was only when Sam pulled forward again that Christopher noticed the exquisite emerald eyes of Kerry Robinson.

"Christopher Muir. How the heck are you?" Kerry flung her arms around her stunned friend.

Christopher stood in a state of disbelief, still holding Sam's leash, arms by his side. His face flushed beetroot.

"K...K...Kerry. Wow, you...you l...look amazing!" He smiled at Kerry, despite the awkwardness of his stutter. It appeared to attach every word he said.

Christopher had known Kerry for a long time, but he felt like a whole lifetime had passed since he last set eyes on

her. Although she had not changed, and her long dark hair made her instantly recognisable, Kerry now looked even prettier than Christopher remembered. When they were younger, they would play for hours in the garden at Milaw house, pretending they were king and queen, ruling the village of Ferncross. It all seemed so silly now to Christopher.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your mum. We all were. I saw you the day of your mum's funeral, but I don't think you saw ... me". Kerry held her hand out and delicately patted Christopher's shoulder. A hot flush swept up his neck and across his face. However, Sam's cool nose nuzzled his hand as if to give his master some comfort.

"I...I didn't s...see you K... Kerry," Christopher's heart slumped lower in his chest. Why did he not notice her on the day of his mum's funeral? Kerry had the most hypnotic green eyes that he had ever seen, so he usually fell into a trance whenever he looked at her. Perhaps if he had set sight on her that day, even for a split second, it would have momentarily appeased his feeling of loss and disbelief.

"Don't worry about it. It must have been so hard. It must still be. Margaret ... I mean ... Ms Muir was so caring. The school and village just aren't the same without her. How's your grandmother bearing up?"

"Sh...she h...has her days. I c...can tell that she really m...misses my m...mum, but she's s...so strong. I don't know wh...what I'd d...do without her."

Once again, Sam reassuringly prodded Christopher's hand and let out a little yowl. The adoring and encouraging look on Sam's face filled him with a short burst of confidence. Before he could think about what he was saying, the words popped out of his mouth "s...so you're a...at Oakwood Academy? I s...start there in a f...f...few days t...too. I'm going into Y...Year Eight."

Kerry hesitated for what felt like an eternity before she answered.

"Yeah, I'm at Oakwood. I'm just about to start Year

Nine. So, I guess that means we will be seeing a lot more of each other?”

Kerry's words danced in Christopher's head. His heart pounded in his chest again, but this time it was in a good way.

“I l...look f...forward to it. It's b...been n...nice c...catching up again”.

“See you around then.” Kerry smiled before popping her wireless Incaendium headphones back into her ears. She turned and then started her journey back along the tree lined Acacia Drive.

Christopher tried to remain calm, in case Kerry turned around to look at them; but excitement visited again, encouraging him to perform a little jig with Sam. For a split second, he was sure that he could hear the voice of Sinatra.

The way you walk and whisper and look.

CHAPTER 5

~ THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD ~

On returning from his walk with Sam, Christopher came face to face with the ridiculous sight of his father's sports car, a black Belasco. Lurking to the right of the driveway, in his mother's old parking space, the car's stygian surface and private registration of **AB1** sneered menacingly at Christopher. The car was immaculate, almost too immaculate. Everything about it was preposterous. Aidan Brenton – and his car - had long outstayed their welcome. Christopher could feel his blood boil; he was certain that his father's actions were deliberate, just to add more fire to an already painful situation. However, Christopher's angst quickly faded when he heard the strained voice of his Nana Kathy.

“How dare you! You've no right to tell me how to raise him. That's my grandwean and my daughter's only bairn!”

“You are indulging in that boy's imagination too much Kathy. It is not normal.” Aidan Brenton's sneering tone was instantly recognisable.

Christopher crept along towards the sill of the hall window and gestured to Sam to be as quiet as possible. The dog, as obedient as ever, followed. He even appeared to be listening to the voices coming from the gap in the window. The two chums then sat hunched below the ledge, trying to work out what was being discussed.

“Kathy, Kathy... calm down, I am just saying ... the boy would be much better with me. He could come and work for me at my Leicester Office. It would be better for him *and* it might put a stop to his vivid imagination”.

“I want you to leave. Now. I don't want you to be here when Christopher gets back. And I've already told you, stop calling me Kathy!”

“Well ... *Mrs Muir*, you will be hearing from my lawyer”.

An uncontrollable spasm suddenly pushed Christopher's foot forward, causing it to scuff along some loose gravel below the window. He tried to move and nudge Sam back along towards the side of the house, but it was too late.

“Christopher, it is very rude to listen in on conversations.” Aiden Brenton's voice sounded so supercilious. “In any case,” he continued before his son could reply, “there was nothing much to hear. I was just having a *nice wee* chat with your grandmother. I am sure you heard the gist of it.”

“Eh ... no ... well, n...not all of it.” Christopher screamed internally at how clumsy and weak he sounded. He wanted to be stronger. He wanted to shout at his father and tell him to leave. But he kept quiet.

“Your faither's just going Christopher. Goodbye. Mr Brenton.”

Christopher could hear his Nana's voice waiver a little, so he walked over to the steps where she was standing at the doorway of Milaw house. Sam was already by Nana Kathy's side. In the fading light of the day, she suddenly looked so frail. The dwindling sunlight reflected on Sam's thick white coat, creating a halo around his prominent stature. For a split second, both Nana Kathy and Sam were surrounded by a white circle of light. Christopher felt like he was looking at an old photograph taken many, many years ago.

“Christopher!” Once again, the growling voice of Mr Brenton interrupted Christopher's thoughts. “The link up on your new phone. I will be waiting on your request later tonight. Do not forget!”

Before Christopher could say goodbye, Mr Brenton stormed off towards his monstrous motor car in the driveway. Christopher did not even wait on the sound of the outrageous rumble of the engine starting; instead, he ventured inside to check on his Nana. Sam led the way.

The hallway of Millaw House felt cold, aching, and

empty. An unwelcome darkness slithered out from the shadows. Christopher switched on the table lamp and instantly the hallway was adorned in longed-for light. He expected to see his Nana sitting on the chaise longue, but she was nowhere to be seen. Concern ushered Sam and Christopher into the sitting room. Nana Kathy was perched on her usual white chair facing the sliding patio doors. She was staring out at the violas in the garden, watching their little purple heads swaying in the evening breeze. Christopher did not say anything. He did not want to disturb her thoughts. Sam padded over to Nana Kathy and cuddled into the sides of her legs. The wagging of his thick tail seemed to awaken her from her trance like state.

“Oh son. I didnae hear you. I was lost in a wee world of my own there”.

Christopher flopped down in the bean bag in front of his Nana. They gazed out at the fading light in the garden. The hypnotic tick of the grandfather clock echoed throughout the empty house, lulling Sam, Christopher and his Nana Kathy towards another place and time. Somewhere in the garden, a nightingale sang the first few notes of his sunset song. Nana Kathy stirred from her thoughts.

“You know, we used to think of your father as a *fairly* decent man. I don’t know what happened to him. Sometimes I think it was all just an act.”

Nana Kathy’s eyes glistened with tears. In the setting sunlight, her eyes looked like precious amber gems. Christopher placed his hand over his Nana’s and held it tightly.

“N...Nana, I’m n... not going anywhere. M...my home is here. With you. I d...don’t care what he wants or says. It’ll b...be all okay ... you’ll see”.

The look on his Nana’s face filled Christopher with such a painful sadness. It was like he was looking at his mother all over again. In the midst of trying to find the right words to say, his Nana thankfully piped up.

“What letter comes after S in the alphabet?”

“Eh... T?” Christopher chuckled. “Thanks N...Nana, I’d l...love a cup”.

Fortunately, Nana Kathy’s strength had made a welcome return, lifting her onto her feet and helping her through to the kitchen. Christopher stood up and stretched out any tiredness that had crept into his limbs before joining her. Sam, watching his every move, followed his master through to where Nana Kathy was standing. The kettle whistled softly, spouting steam up into air before settling and blanching the huge kitchen window facing the garden. Christopher wiped away some of the condensation from the glass and looked out at the changing light. Evening had finally arrived. The sky was awash with a whole palette of different blues and purples. Somewhere in the distance, the ominous bark of a solitary fox pierced the air. A cold breeze stirred, snaking its way through the gap in the hopper above, sending a shiver through Christopher’s body. He shut the window and turned around to find his Nana with her arm outstretched, offering him a mug of hot tea.

“Mind the way you used to draw happy faces with your finger whenever the windows steamed up? But whenever I tried to give you into trouble, your cheeky wee chops would win me over and we’d both end up giggling.” His Nana smiled at the memory before sipping her tea.

Christopher was glad to see that the rosiness had returned to her cheeks.

“It seems j ... just like yesterday. D...don’t worry though Nana, I have n...no urge to d...draw all over the windows t...tonight”.

As they drank the rest of their tea, Christopher and his Nana reminisced about the old times in Milaw house. Their laughter and merriment brought the memories of happier times alive, making Christopher feel at ease again. Sam lay

by their feet, listening to their every word. Although his head was propped against his paws, the Siberian's bright blue eyes moved from Christopher to Nana Kathy and back again, as if he understood every word. There was no talk of Aiden Brenton and so it set the house at peace again. It was only when the grandfather clock chimed softly in the hall that Christopher and his Nana stopped talking.

"Well N...Nana, I th...think it's time for my bed. It's b...been quite a day...for all of us!" He wanted to say something about Sam, but he suddenly felt so stupid. Where would he even begin?

"It sure has son," his Nana replied, taking the mugs to the sink, and turning on the hot tap. "You go on up to bed, I'll take care of these."

Christopher bid his Nana goodnight and gave her a kiss on the cheek. He could almost hear the sneering jibes of *sissy* being shouted at him for doing so, but he did not care. Given everything that had happened, Christopher had no problem in showing how much he cared for, loved, and appreciated his Nana Kathy. He had learned one of life's hardest lessons: loved ones do not live forever. In the eyes of his so-called friends he might be a *sissy*, but at least his Nana knew how much he loved her.

Christopher climbed the stairs towards his bedroom, but he was so caught up in thoughts of his Nana and father's argument that he had not even fully considered the craziness of the day's events. The magnificent dog that he had somehow managed to conjure up through his writing was already sitting patiently at the end of his bed, keeping a patch of his bed warm. Christopher slumped down beside Sam and ruffled the hair on his fluffy head. His white coat made Christopher recall the wooden horse in the old lean-to and the strange engraving of *Decemuir sacrorum libri*. He had felt drawn towards every letter. He just had to find out what it all meant.

"*Perhaps tomorrow we will go back to the lean-to and explore a little further*", Christopher whispered to Sam. The dog

wagged his bushy tail in agreement. His master's stutter had disappeared yet again.

Before climbing into bed, Christopher thought that he should tackle the new mobile phone. He knew that he should have been incredibly grateful for the gift, but it filled him with dread. He also knew that if he did not link the phone to his father's, then he would never hear the end of it. As he pressed the **on** button, the black screen flushed scarlet with the Incaendium logo: a black stag's head with the letter I emblazoned at its centre.

The phone felt alien to Christopher. He was not particularly good with technology and he always preferred to read paperbacks; staring at the harsh glare of an electronic book almost always gave him a headache.

Request to read retina flickered in red.

Christopher hesitated, and then pressed **OK**. He held the device in front of his eyes and gazed into its hollow darkness. Suddenly, a luminescent flare scored through his vision; Christopher felt like he had just looked directly at a solar eclipse. The pain forced him to drop the phone and hold his hands over his clenched-shut eyelids. White hot letters spelling out **IGNIS** scavorted in front of him. In the empty darkness, he felt another presence. Christopher quickly rubbed his eyes before opening them, but he still had trouble focusing.

Thankfully, there was no one else in his room. The mobile phone lay abandoned on the floor; its red glow eerily illuminated the corner of Christopher's bedroom. It was like a magnet. He was compelled to pick up the device and follow whatever instruction it decreed. Without even thinking, he obeyed a series of instructions before pairing his device to his father's. It ordered him to link up his email and old social media accounts. It had been years since Christopher had even logged into any of them. The next

thing he knew, endless messages from his so-called friends back in Leicester appeared, asking *how's the stutter?* and *where've u bn?* Panic gargled at the back of Christopher's throat. It dragged him back into the land of living. He felt his heart beat out of time as he was bombarded with commands and orders. It was all too much. His head hurt and his eyes ached, so he switched the phone off and threw it in his wardrobe. Sam stared nervously at his master.

Finally, in the comfort of his bed, Christopher pulled out his notebook and his Papa Tommy's pen. He had been looking forward to this part of the day, away from his father and the flashing lights of the horrible Incaendium device. Thankfully, his eyes no longer hurt. Sam shifted at the bottom of the bed, nuzzling himself into the feet of his master.

Christopher began writing.

Just like before in the old lean-to, the pen told the story. The nib effortlessly skipped across the paper. The words joined to make an adventure about a beautiful green-eyed girl called Kerry and how she would fall in love with a charming young man called Christopher. They would live a long happy life together with their dog Sam.

"Well", Christopher whispered to Sam, his voice heavy with slumber as he put the pen and notepad on his bed side cabinet, "*if I can conjure you up from writing with this pen, then surely my story will make Kerry fall in love with me.*"

Sam whimpered lightly in response.

And then the two friends fell sound asleep.

CHAPTER 6

~ THE GRANDFATHER CLOCK ~

BUZZZZZ ... BUZZZZZ ... BUZZZZZ! A seething pulsation pulled Christopher from his slumber. He struggled to his feet. His eyes felt strained at the sunlight slicing through the window as he scrambled to where the sound was coming from. He flung his wardrobe door open in order to find the culprit: it was the Incaendium mobile phone. Its red obtrusive screen flashed impatiently with the message: **Dad calling**. Christopher quickly grabbed the device and pressed down hard on the power **off** button. The screen went blank. He could not face speaking to his father that early in the day.

Christopher slumped backwards onto the comfort of his bed. The silence calmed his galloping heart. He was worried that his Nana would have heard the racket, but there was not a sound to be heard in the house. Although the panic was beginning to leave, Christopher still felt uneasy: he was sure that he had turned the Incaendium phone off before he went to bed.

"I knew it w...was a bad idea", he mumbled to Sam, turning around to see if his dog was awake yet. However, his heart leapt into his mouth. Sam was nowhere to be seen. Salty tears blurred Christopher's vision as he tried to make sense of what was happening. He swallowed down a huge lump of sadness. Was Sam just a figment of his imagination after all?

Before he knew it, Christopher was at the bottom of the staircase, frantically searching for his best friend. He was about to start shouting his dog's name at the top of his lungs, but he was stopped in his tracks by a wonderful white vision: Sam was sitting in front of the old grandfather clock in the hall, wagging his tail. Christopher fell to his knees and flung his arms around his dog.

“I...I thought I’d l...lost you”, he whimpered into the Siberian’s ears.

At first, Christopher was too caught up in his reunion with Sam to have noticed the folded piece of paper lying in front of the grandfather clock. It was only when the magnificent clock chimed once, declaring the time of quarter past seven, that Christopher spotted the wrinkled cartridge paper. This was the all-important wedge responsible for keeping the grandfather clock’s door firmly shut – and it had been like that for years. It was only Nana Kathy that habitually removed the paper to wind up the gears. She took great pride in looking after the grandfather clock, so Christopher thought it was strange that she had not placed the paper back into the door to keep it shut. Standing majestically in the hall, the clock had witnessed many a happy occasion in Milaw house. Nana Kathy liked to call it *a Muir family heirloom*.

Before he jammed the paper back into the clock’s door, curiosity nudged Christopher, begging him to open the worn cartridge paper. It was only at this point that he wondered why he had not looked at it before. As he unfolded it, tiny speckles of cartridge crumbled onto the floor, indicating its age. Inside, he found an elaborate handwritten note: *key ad alterum orbem terrarum in bibliotheca mendacium*.

Seconds turned into minutes. Christopher sat on the hall floor staring at the strange, but familiar writing. Although the words were written in ink, the handwriting appeared to be in the same style as the inscription carved into the hobby horse in the old leant-to. He had no idea what it all meant. Unfortunately, foreign languages had never been one of Christopher’s strong points. At primary school, he struggled to pronounce any new French words his teacher threw at him. The mere thought of those uncomfortable lessons, along with the memory of his formidable French teacher, stirred a sickly feeling in his stomach.

Clang – Clang.

The grandfather clock struck half past seven. The floorboards creaked above. Nana Kathy was awake. Christopher did not want her to know that he had been prying, so he quickly refolded the thick paper and carefully placed it back into the door of the grandfather clock. He sat back and patted the fur of Sam's nape, content that his canine chum was by his side again. They sat staring at the clock's face, enthralled by its hypnotic rhythm. Although the strange words were now locked away from his view, Christopher could still envisage the writing when he shut his eyes. The ornate script danced in his memory like glitter falling through the air.

Upstairs in his bedroom, Christopher took out his notebook and scribbled down what he could remember of the strange words. Then he placed his Papa's pen back into the top drawer of his bedside cabinet and tucked his notepad into his jacket pocket. He crept back into bed and shut his eyes. He did not want his Nana to know about his early morning discovery; she would just think that he had been snooping around.

But all was to no avail.

"Christopher?" Nana Kathy's voice pierced the silence. Her footsteps followed her question, "whit were you doing up so early this morning?"

Before Christopher could answer, her dainty face appeared around his door. He nearly burst out laughing at the sight of her curlers and hair-net clad head.

"I ... eh ... I needed a glass of water Nana. Sorry if I woke you up".

Christopher expected his response to be met with a string of questions, but Nana Kathy just smiled and winked towards Sam and his master. Then she vanished from the doorway.

Christopher was curious. Did she know what he had

been up to? Perhaps, he even thought, Nana Kathy had left the paper there on purpose.

However, he was interrupted by the best question of all, radiating from the top of the hall staircase: “Do you want two bits of toast with your scrambled eggs son?”

Christopher popped his head around the door and shouted, “three bits please Nana.”

Outside Christopher’s bedroom window, Ferncross Village was alive with the promise of a new day. He could just make out the faint whistle of the postman and the clinking of milk bottles. Everybody knew everything about anyone in the village and this filled Christopher with anxiety. Starting year eight at Oakwood Academy was hard enough but being the son of Aidan Brenton made it even worse. His father’s success was plastered everywhere. There was no escape. This was the reason why Christopher insisted on using his mother’s maiden name - *Muir* - for his surname; he did not want any of his prospective school mates knowing the truth. Besides, the folk of Ferncross thought fondly of his mother and many were still mourning her loss. He always felt more like a Muir than a Brenton.

Christopher tried to focus his thoughts on Kerry in order to stop the overwhelming lump of grief gathering at the back of his throat. He pulled out his notepad again to read the words of last night’s story. The pages fell open at the words he had frantically penned earlier. Although it was his handwriting, the word *bibliotheca* leapt out of the page. Suddenly, white sparkles shimmered, blinding his vision. Christopher shut his eyes and sat on the floor beside Sam, waiting for his dizziness to disappear. He felt strangely calm though; in fact, he felt quite giddy, as if he was going to burst into hysterics at any moment. The excitement made him open his eyes again to find Sam sitting proudly beside the notepad. His paw seemed to be pointing to the words:

library and book.

That's strange, Christopher thought, I don't recall writing that.

It was only when he picked up his notepad to take a closer look, Christopher realised that another note had appeared underneath: *Siberian est protector.*

He recognised the style of handwriting instantly: it was written in the same script as the note in the grandfather clock.

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