

# DELIRIUM

Two worlds. Two millennia. One love.

DEE SHULMAN

PENGUIN BOOKS



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‘It’s a great ride with evocative settings and intense emotion ★★★★★’ *SFX*

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DEE SHULMAN has a degree in English from York University and went on to study Illustration at Harrow School of Art. She has written and/or illustrated about fifty books, but the Parallon trilogy is her first series for teenagers, which is surprising considering she lives on a campus with about 760 of them.

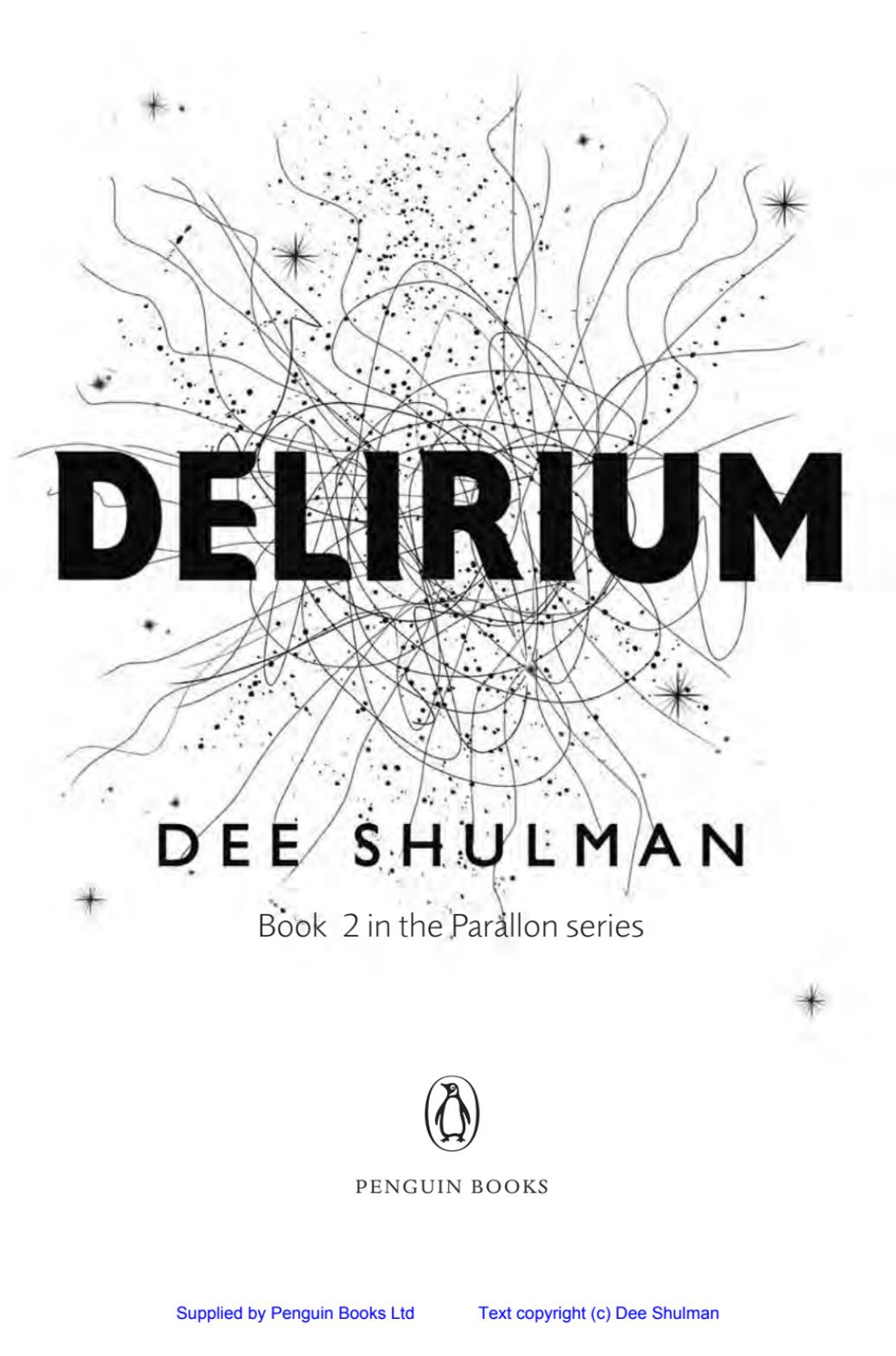
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*Books by Dee Shulman*

The Parallon series

FEVER

DELIRIUM



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DEE SHULMAN

Book 2 in the Parallon series



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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

*For Axie*



## In Book 1, *Fever*: the story so far . . .

**London** AD 2012: After two expulsions, sixteen-year-old rebel misfit **Eva Koretsky** unexpectedly wins a place at St Magdalene's, a school for the highly gifted. When virologist Professor Ambrose shows her some unusual slides, she can't resist exploring further, and accidentally becomes infected by a deadly virus. Defying all medical predictions, Eva survives, but is severely weakened and plagued by vivid nightmares.

**Londinium** AD 152: When eighteen-year-old gladiator **Sethos Leontis** is dangerously injured in the arena, he is taken to the house of his patrons to recover. There, he falls in love with Livia, their adopted daughter. But she is betrothed to Cassius, the ruthless Londinium procurator. Seth and Livia plan to flee, but Cassius and his guards intercept them. Seth is forced to watch Cassius cutting Livia's throat before they turn on him.

**Parallon**: Seth wakes up miraculously healed in a shimmering world where he has the power to invent his own environment. But he is alone – and Parallon without Livia is an empty prison. When he inadvertently discovers the vortex, a fiercely guarded time corridor, and survives the experience, he becomes the

reluctant protégé of Zackary, the vortex's mysterious guardian. Meanwhile fellow slave Matthias has arrived in Parallon, and as more and more people follow, Seth discovers that all the inhabitants are connected by a devastating fever. Zackary finally agrees to help Seth track the fever by sending him through the vortex to begin research in the formidably equipped St Magdalene's School.

**London AD 2013:** Seth walks into the St Mag's biology lab and finds himself face to face with Livia. Except she calls herself Eva. And she doesn't know him.

When Eva sees Seth for the first time, some buried memory is triggered, but she doesn't trust it, especially as his presence seems to be exacerbating her nightmares, and his touch is almost overwhelming. Despite every effort to avoid him, she continues to be magnetically drawn to him, until she can resist no longer. He finally convinces her that she somehow shares a past with Livia and helps her remember their passion, and Cassius's vicious revenge.

But the rediscovery of their love is marred by the knowledge that Seth believes he carries a deadly virus, and one kiss from him could kill her. Having already lost her in one life, Seth decides, to Eva's dismay, that he is not prepared to take that risk.

The rift this causes almost breaks them both, and finally, unable to hold back any longer, Eva reaches up to kiss him, determined that wherever their love takes her it is a place she wants to go . . .

# Significant Characters from Book 1, *Fever*

## *London 2012/13*

### *St Magdalene's School*

**Eva Koretsky**, sixteen, misfit, genius, hacker, singer. Daughter of Jane and stepdad Colin Brewer. Stepsister to Ted.

**Sethos Leontis**, eighteen, originally first-century AD gladiator slave in Londinium. Travels to London 2013 via a time corridor.

**Astrid Rettfar**, seventeen, bass player, band leader

**Rob Wilmer**, seventeen, in love with Eva, plays keys in the band

**Sadie Bekant**, eighteen, drummer in the band

**Ruby Garcia**, seventeen, formerly Eva's best friend, now her sworn enemy

**Rose Marley**, school matron

**Dr Crispin**, headteacher

**Dr Franklin**, biology teacher

**Dr Drury**, music teacher

**Professor Ambrose**, visiting pathogenic virologist

### *Guy's Hospital*

**Dr Falana**, consultant haematologist, grappling with Eva's mystifying symptoms

## *Londinium AD 152*

**Cassius Malchus**, procurator, husband to the missing Livia

**Otho**, Cassius's elite guard

**Rufus**, Cassius's elite guard

**Pontius**, Cassius's elite guard

**Blandus**, Cassius's accountant

**Sabina**, Cassius's house-slave (helped with Seth and Livia's escape attempt)

**Domitus and Flavia Natalis**, adopted parents to Livia

**Vibia**, Natalis's house-slave (helped with Seth and Livia's escape attempt)

**Ochira**, Natalis's house-slave

**Tertius**, lanista (manager and trainer) of the gladiatorial barracks

## *Parallon*

**Zackary**, enigmatic figure who lives near the river and the vortex

**Matthias**, formerly Seth's best friend and fellow slave (physician) in the AD 152 gladiatorial barracks

**Georgia**, one of Matthias's girlfriends

**Clare**, friend of Georgia, in love with Seth

**Elena Galanis**, a café waitress that Matthias infected in 2013 London and brought over to Parallon

**Winston Grey**, a motorcyclist Matthias infected in 2013 London and brought over to Parallon

**Emerson, Blake, Tamara**, other friends living in Matthias's house

# Prologue

## *Londinium*

AD 152

There was a loud hammering on the front door. Ochira, one of the Natalis family house-slaves, paused in her vegetable chopping. Both porter slaves were currently in the cellar, mopping up water from a leaking drainage pipe, and all the other house-slaves were out on errands. Ochira had no choice.

She walked quickly across the atrium to the door. A tall, angular man wearing a richly woven toga stood leaning against one of the marble pillars.

‘Greetings,’ he began.

Ochira bowed low.

‘My name is Ambrosius. I have come to visit the lady Livia. Is she at home?’

Ochira’s face paled, and her hands began to tremble. ‘The – the l-lady Livia is n-not here.’

‘Then I’ll wait,’ he said, pushing past her towards the atrium.

Ochira stumbled backwards, overpowered by his unexpected

entry. She darted quickly after him, wringing her hands. ‘The lady Livia was married three months ago –’

The stranger instantly froze, then slowly turned back to face her, his dark eyes narrowing dangerously. ‘Impossible!’ he hissed, taking hold of Ochira by the shoulders and shaking her. Ochira gasped in pain.

‘Forgive me,’ he said quickly, dropping his hands. Then he massaged his temples wearily. ‘Was she willing?’ he asked evenly.

Ochira bit the inside of her cheek and stared at the ground.

‘Who is he?’ the stranger spat.

‘C-C-Cassius Malchus . . . the procurator himself.’

‘And Livia is at his house now?’ he asked, striding back towards the door.

Ochira was too afraid to answer.

The stranger suddenly swung round and fixed her with his black eyes. ‘Is – the – lady – Livia – at – Cassius’s – house – now?’ The chilling restraint of his voice served only to amplify the slave girl’s fear.

She trembled and shook her head. ‘No, sir! Th-the l-lady Livia has disappeared.’

‘Gone?’ he choked.

Ochira bit her thumbnail nervously. She had been absolutely forbidden to talk on the subject, but there was something so powerful about the stranger that she was unable to resist the overwhelming compulsion to confide.

‘Some say she r-ran away . . . but –’

‘But?’ he hissed impatiently.

‘Others think . . . she was . . . m-murdered . . .’

The stranger’s sudden stillness was terrifying. Ochira didn’t

dare meet his eyes. She stood staring at her shoes until he turned and strode from the house.

With a shaking hand she shut the heavy wooden door and slumped against it, a deep sense of foreboding tightening in her chest.



# 1

## Survival

*St Magdalene's School, London*

*Thursday 14 March AD 2013*

*I watched in horror as his lips suddenly curved into a sadistic smile. I knew that the moment had come. He would offer no mercy. His eyes were filled with savage pleasure.*

*How did he find out about us? Who betrayed us? I tried to see past him, tried to find Seth. But Cassius's vicious face filled my vision . . .*

*And then the flash of silver . . . the knife glinting in the moonlight. The knife he'd brought to kill me. He laughed, relishing the moment. I would not show fear. I refused to give him that satisfaction.*

*And then I felt the heat of the blade as it sliced along my throat.*

*I couldn't even scream . . .*

'Eva! Wake up! Eva . . . can you hear me?'

Rose Marley, the school matron, stood over me. I tried to catch my breath, but I was looking around the room frantically.

‘Seth?’ I choked. ‘Where’s Seth?’

‘I sent Seth back to his room to get some sleep, Eva. He hasn’t left your side for hours! I’ve never seen such stamina! I don’t know why, but he seemed convinced that we were about to lose you!’

Oh, Rose. If only you knew how close to the truth you were. Seth had been so sure that I wouldn’t survive his kiss. Yet here I was. His virus hadn’t claimed me. I was still at St Magdalene’s. Still alive.

‘How long have I been asleep?’

‘Hmmm . . .’ Rose consulted her watch. ‘About fourteen hours. Must be your record!’

So that’s why Seth had felt able to leave. If he was as lethal as he thought, I would be dead by now.

Suddenly the sheer joy of this realization made me want to laugh out loud. And if that wasn’t reason enough, Rose Marley’s expression was priceless – a mixture of bewilderment and exasperation.

‘Honestly, girl,’ she muttered. ‘One minute you’re screaming, the next you’re laughing. What am I to do with you?’

‘Nothing, Rose!’ I grinned. ‘Everything’s going to be fine now, I’m sure of it.’

Rose shook her head, straightened up and walked over to the window. The light was seeping through the curtains.

‘What time is it?’ I asked.

‘About twelve. Nearly lunchtime.’

‘What day?’

‘Thursday.’

I groaned. ‘I should be in biology.’

‘We’ll talk about you going back to classes after lunch.’

‘Aw, Rose!’ I whined. ‘You’re treating me like an invalid again!’

‘Oh, excuse me!’ snorted Rose. ‘I must be mixing you up with the girl who stopped breathing a couple of weeks ago!’

I rolled my eyes. ‘OK if the invalid takes a shower?’ I asked in the sweetest voice I could muster.

She reached over and checked my blood pressure. ‘Fine. Just don’t lock the door.’

Throwing back the duvet, I pulled myself out of bed. Hmm. No dizziness. Definitely feeling better.

‘Lunch is ready, so come down as soon as you’re done,’ she called, making her way downstairs. I grabbed my towel and headed for the bathroom.

As I stood under the water, all my fears seemed to evaporate into its steamy comfort. I closed my eyes and deepened my contentment by thinking of Seth: his beautiful face; his strong body; and the perfect kiss we had just shared – and survived. The headiness of the physical sensations came flooding back . . . the smell of him; the sweetness of his breath; the softness of his mouth; the familiar warmth of his arms as they curled round me. And then I was overwhelmed once more by the mind-blowing knowledge that I was still here. I’d got to live. And to keep Seth! How cool was that?

I wrapped myself in a warm fluffy towel and padded back to my room. After quickly slipping on jeans and a T-shirt, I was just combing out my wet hair when there was a quiet knock on the door.

‘Eva?’ whispered a familiar voice. A moment later I was smiling into those clear blue eyes. His arms enveloped me and I was back where I belonged.

‘Oh, Eva,’ he breathed into my hair, ‘I just had to come and make sure you were still here.’

I grinned up at him. ‘Can’t get rid of me that easily!’

Then his mouth was suddenly on mine and I was transported. The St Magdalene’s medical block slipped away and we were back in our green meadow, insects buzzing, birds singing, the fragrance of grass and wild flowers filling the air.

‘Eva!’ a voice called from the distance.

The meadow disappeared. I was once more in my room, Seth standing warily in front of me . . . Rose calling from the bottom of the stairs. ‘Are you ever coming down?’

Seth grinned and put a finger to his lips.

‘How did you get past her?’

He shrugged enigmatically.

‘I’ll engineer a diversion downstairs so you can slip out!’

‘Don’t worry,’ he smiled, ‘I can manage my escape without any tactical manoeuvres.’

‘Will I see you in art history this afternoon?’ I still couldn’t quite believe he was real.

‘Will Rose let you out?’

‘She’d better not try stopping me,’ I pronounced. He turned to leave again, but I couldn’t bear to let him go. I gripped on to his shirt and reached up to touch his face. So perfect.

‘*EVA! Are you all right?*’ called Rose from downstairs. I heard her feet begin to mount the steps.

‘Just coming, Rose,’ I called back quickly, reluctantly releasing him and heading slowly for the door. The last thing I needed was her catching Seth in my bedroom. I turned my head to snatch one final glimpse of him and again almost lost my resolve. How could I leave him? I’d only just found him. He

seemed to be feeling the same way, because within moments I was back in his arms.

‘I can’t let you go,’ he murmured against my lips.

‘You have to,’ I smiled, but continued to hold him tight.

‘*Eva Koretsky! Do I have to come up there and get you?*’

I sighed, as Seth’s arms fell reluctantly away.

‘I’ll get out of here as soon as I can,’ I muttered, and headed downstairs.

An hour later I was triumphantly crossing the quad to art history. Before I got halfway, Rob Wilmer stepped in beside me.

‘Eva, you’re looking great!’ he said with a grin. ‘How’re you doing?’

I nodded happily. ‘Good, thanks. Really good!’

‘Brilliant!’ he said, squeezing my arm – and leaving his hand attached. I shot him an uneasy glance.

‘I could have done with you in biology this morning,’ he chatted on obliviously. ‘I’m not getting bacterial cell polarity at all.’

We’d nearly reached the art history room when I felt the familiar warm presence behind me. I turned round delightedly, but Seth’s face was like thunder, his eyes entirely focused on Rob’s hand hooked round my arm.

An instant later, Rob, barely aware yet that Seth was there, dropped his hand as though it had been scalded.

Weird.

Rob stood looking down at his hand in confusion. I glanced up at Seth’s face, but it was inscrutable. And then Seth’s arm was round me and my world tipped back into balance. He propelled us to seats near the front and I settled comfortably into his warmth.

When Dr Lofts turned out the lights, I did my best to concentrate on the amazing colour of the Fauve paintings she was introducing. It might have been an easier task if Seth hadn't been sitting so close. I was just about managing to keep my eyes on the screen, when our hands accidentally touched – and suddenly another set of images superimposed themselves on to the darkened room . . . A Roman forum . . . Seth standing in front of me, a big cloak slung round his shoulders, the glimpse of white toga underneath.

When the noises of the forum began to overpower the sound of Dr Lofts's lesson, I knew I was in real danger of slipping. I could feel my breath coming too quick and shallow, my pulse too fast. I grabbed on to the seat, willing myself back in the room. But the seat wasn't there.

'Eva?' Seth was holding me by my shoulders. But which Seth? I didn't know where I was now. I began to panic.

'Eva, breathe. Slow deep breaths. Can you hear me?'

I tried to do as the voice instructed. Deep breaths. In. Out. I didn't want to be in the forum, something terrifying waited for me there . . . Slow deep breaths . . . Slow deep breaths . . . To my relief the market place started to dissipate and the sounds of the classroom regained supremacy. I opened my eyes and Seth was right there. My Seth. My *now* Seth. Unfortunately, so were a few other people. Including Dr Lofts.

'Everything all right?' She'd stopped her presentation and was looming over us.

'Everything's fine, Dr Lofts,' Seth answered quickly.

'Perhaps you should take Eva outside for a breath of air.'

'Are you OK to walk, baby?' Seth murmured.

I nodded shakily, and with his support I made my undignified

exit. Seth led me over to a bench, sat me down and then squatted in front of me. ‘Eva – where did you go?’

‘The forum . . . I was meeting you. But everything hurt . . . and I was s-so scared . . .’

Seth’s eyes narrowed furiously. ‘Cassius!’ he spat.

Dark images began flooding my brain. Cassius – his hot stinking breath against my face – his heavily ringed hand smashing into my jaw . . . the impact throwing me back against the wall . . .

‘Eva –’ That compelling voice – but too far away . . . and Cassius’s grasp so tight – now wielding his silver-studded stick, his eyes glinting with ruthless purpose.

‘Eva – don’t let him take you back . . . Listen to me, baby . . . You’re safe. Can you hear me?’

Seth. Slamming through the darkness, pushing away the vicious laughter . . . His warm arms round me, his body still and strong.

I was shivering, but his hands softly rubbed my back while his voice whispered sweet, familiar Greek words – a comforting combination that gently hauled me back to my life. My happy life.

‘Hi!’ he smiled when I finally stopped shaking.

I reached up and kissed him. ‘Thank you,’ I whispered.

‘Hey, Eva – you did really well this time.’

I snorted. ‘In what possible way did I just do really well?’

‘No ambulance, no blackout! You found your way back from one of the bad places,’ he said. ‘That’s the first time, I think.’

I blinked up at him. It hadn’t felt like much of a victory.

‘It may mean you’re gaining control over that life.’

I squeezed his hands. ‘It’s going to be OK, isn’t it?’

‘We’re together – of course it’s going to be OK!’

‘I just wish I understood what’s happening – what happened to me.’

‘Me too. But we do know one thing. The fever is the key. Once we understand that, we’ll understand it all.’

‘There is something we know about it . . .’ I smiled, laying my head on his shoulder.

‘What’s that?’ he asked, touching my temple with his lips.

‘. . . It isn’t as lethal as you thought!’

‘You mean the kiss?’ he murmured, gazing out across the quad. ‘I don’t really understand quite how you survived that,’ he admitted, squeezing my hand. ‘Unless I misunderstood what Matthias told me . . .’

‘Matthias?’ I queried. The name rang a bell.

Seth’s face hardened. ‘Er – nobody,’ he sighed. ‘Just someone I used to –’ Then he shook his head and shrugged. ‘Anyway, he led me to believe that the infection wasn’t only transmitted by blood.’

‘Which is what you’d previously thought?’

Seth shrugged. ‘I know very little . . .’ he admitted.

I sighed. ‘And I’ve done everything I can to find out about my illness, but I just keep drawing blanks.’

‘Drawing blanks?’

I grinned. It was so easy to forget English wasn’t his first language. ‘Coming up against dead ends?’

He blinked, bewildered.

‘Hitting walls?’

He shook his head and laughed. ‘I’m guessing that you’re trying to find an elegant way of saying you haven’t found the answer yet either?’

I play-punched him on the shoulder. ‘OK, Mr Brilliant. Any suggestions?’

‘Of course – we need to work together. Two perspectives. Two journeys. Two heads. Together we’ll crack this thing.’

‘Crack this thing?’ I mocked, but that was all I got to say, because he had decided to shut me up with a kiss and I wasn’t going to argue with that.

## 2

# Celebration

### *Parallon*

Matthias was creating vase after vase of fragrant roses. In shades of pink. Because pink was Georgia's favourite colour. And he was trying to get this right. He surveyed the room with satisfaction. The walls were festooned with swathes of ribbon and flowers. The table creaked under the weight of the sumptuous banquet. It was nearly time.

According to Georgia's calculations it was now 25 July – her nineteenth birthday. Of course her dates didn't tally with anyone else's in Parallon, but she really didn't care. Neither did Matthias. He was always ready to celebrate. Celebrations were fun and they were a good distraction. And he was after distraction.

'Oh, they're beautiful!' gasped Georgia, as she clunked a large jug of punch on to the table.

Matthias smiled, then frowned as he noticed that she'd also added two plates of sausages on sticks and several bowls of crisps.

'I can't get used to the disgusting eating habits of your century,' he sighed, kissing the top of her head.

‘Are you planning to get changed?’ she asked, looking pointedly at his tunic. She couldn’t believe he still preferred to walk around in his weird Roman clothes.

‘It’s your birthday – what would you have me wear?’

‘You may regret that question!’ she laughed, as Matthias’s tunic was suddenly replaced by a blue shirt and chinos. He raised his eyebrows, but she was shaking her head. ‘No – not right. Too conservative.’

He looked down to find he now wore a white T-shirt and jeans.

‘Are we done?’ he groaned. Her head was cocked ominously to one side. She was still considering. A moment later he was sporting a dinner suit and black tie.

Georgia surveyed him with approval. ‘Perfect! Now hold the fort while I get myself dressed.’ And she swept out again.

Matthias was just about to pour himself a drink when Clare crept in.

‘Has she gone?’ she hissed. ‘I need to do the cake!’

‘What cake?’

‘Duh! Matt! The birthday cake!’

Matt gazed in fascination as Clare experimented with options.

‘Too much?’ she asked, as a huge, white, three-tiered, sugar-frosted confection appeared in the middle of the table. ‘I’ve been designing it for days!’

‘That can’t be edible,’ breathed Matthias. ‘What are all those little flowers made of?’

‘Sugar! Now hands off!’

He’d never seen anything like it, and just couldn’t resist grabbing a corner flower and popping it into his mouth, but instead

of slapping his fingers, as he'd expected, Clare stood frowning at the cake distractedly.

'Matt – d-do you think Seth might put in an appearance tonight?'

'No, Clare, I don't.' He tried to walk away, but she grabbed his arm.

'Why did he go, Matt? W-was it me? Was it something I said? He's been away so long . . . and I've looked everywhere for him. You must know – y-you're his b-best f-friend . . .'

*Was*, thought Matt bitterly. He hadn't told anyone why Seth had left. How could he? It would mean admitting that *he* was to blame. And the infuriating part was that he hadn't done anything wrong. Matt hadn't *abused* the vortex as Seth claimed. He'd made use of it. In the best possible way. He'd given Winston, Elena and all the others a great gift – the gift of immortality – in an incredible, magical place where everything was possible. The fact that he'd had to kill them in their original world and time was immaterial. They would, after all, have died sooner or later.

*I bet if I told Clare about the stupid argument, she'd agree with me*, thought Matt bitterly, but he was unable to test that theory because it would mean exposing the vortex, and Seth had made him swear *never* to reveal the nature or whereabouts of the unique doorway. And, despite everything, Matt didn't want to break his word. Not to Seth. Even though Seth had made it absolutely clear their friendship was irrevocably over. Which was why Matt knew that Seth was never going to walk back through that door.

But he had no intention of sharing that information with Clare. Why in Apollo's name hadn't she got over her crush on

him yet? Most girls fell for Seth, but they moved on. Especially as he never gave them any cause for hope. His heart had been won and lost to Livia. And when Livia died, all his love had gone with her.

Except that now he was fixated on some girl who looked like Livia. At some twenty-first-century London school. Matt glanced helplessly at Clare. He had neither the vocabulary nor the will to comfort her. She was sweet. He liked her – would have *really* liked her if Georgia wasn't so possessive – but *all this emotion!* Girls! Why did every little thing seem to mean so much to them?

'Hey! I thought this was supposed to be a party!' declared Elena, breezing into the room in a stunning black silk sheath dress.

Matt smiled appreciatively.

Elena moved gracefully over to the punch and poured herself a glass. 'Goodness!' she smirked, staring at the table. 'Who's brilliant contribution was the *wedding* cake?'

Clare turned on her furiously, stood for a moment in spluttering silence and stormed out.

'What did I say?' shrugged Elena, padding towards Matt and kissing him hard on the mouth.

'Elena,' he murmured into her lips, 'please give Clare a break!'

'I'd sooner give Georgia a break – from you . . .' she smirked.

'Be good,' he hissed. 'It's Georgia's birthday.' Matt reluctantly pulled himself out of Elena's embrace, and straightened his tie – just in time.

'Well? How do I look?' smiled Georgia, striding into the room, resplendent in a gold leather jacket and leopard-skin minidress.

‘Gorgeous,’ smiled Matthias, shooting a warning glance at Elena. Georgia frowned, sensing the taut atmosphere, and was on the point of commenting when the doorbell rang and Matt leaped gratefully to answer it.

It wasn’t long before the entire villa was filled with people. Matt glided between them happily, refilling glasses, joking about the music playing and generally fulfilling his role as host. He was just spooning chicken and coriander on to Elena’s plate when his hand suddenly froze. A man in a Roman tunic had just edged past.

*Seth?*

The flash of elation was instantly crushed by the realization that it wasn’t Seth. This man was too broad and heavy. Matthias watched him settle into a corner next to one of the speakers, his heart racing. But it was no longer excitement coursing through his veins; it was fear.

### 3

## Breaking News

*Channel 7 Newsroom, Soho, London*

*Friday 15 March AD 2013*

Jennifer Linden looked around the office desperately. It was 6.45 p.m. and unless she left right now she was going to be late.

Although the programme she worked on had finished airing nearly an hour ago, most of the other desk assistants, producers and fixers were still hard at work – as she would normally be. There was an unspoken rule that unless you were suicidal you didn't leave work before the reporter. Especially when she happened to be Amanda Pilkington. And despite the sounds of murmured desk conversations, the tapping of keyboards and whirring of fans and printouts, Jennifer could still hear the production meeting going on next door. A crucial live link hadn't come through on tonight's programme and they were doing a major inquest. How long was it going to go on? Her eyes flicked towards the meeting-room door and glimpsed the line of digital wall clocks . . . Oh God – the UK clock was reading nearly 7 p.m.! If only

she was in Buenos Aires – she'd still have a couple of hours to play with.

Maybe if she left her jacket on the back of the chair and snuck out now, Amanda, her boss, might just think she'd popped to the loo. But it would mean going the whole evening without a coat, and it was freezing.

Small price to pay, she decided.

So, taking a deep breath, Jennifer saved and closed the 'Eurozone Deficits' document she'd been working on, and was on the point of shutting down her PC when an ominous shadow loomed over her desk.

Amanda.

Jen's heart sank. How'd she managed to sneak up on her *this* time?

'I need these read, analyzed and prioritized by the morning,' said Amanda, sliding a disk on to Jen's desk.

Jen nodded mutely. She didn't bother mentioning that it was Friday night. That she was supposed to be meeting someone on the other side of London in exactly twenty-nine minutes. That they had gold-dust tickets for the Livid Turkey gig at Wembley. There was no point. Around here Amanda was God, and if she wanted something done – it got done; if she wanted you to stay in the newsroom all night and all weekend – you stayed.

Jennifer glanced at the door as Amanda closed it deliberately behind her. She could hear Amanda's heels as they clipped along the corridor to the lift. Jen ground her teeth. She'd be here till morning. With a deep sigh, she pulled out her mobile and started texting.

Hi Nick, won't be able to make it. Gotta stay and work.

Gutted

Her finger hovered over the send key.

How could she bail now? What would he think? It sounded so lame. Like she didn't want to go. And she did – she really did. They'd only been together five weeks, and she liked him. A lot. Not to mention Livid Turkey, of course, her favourite band. She glanced at the time and, with a sudden resolve, made her decision.

A couple of minutes later she'd shut down her computer, slid the disk into her pocket and was slipping out of the door. She paused for a moment to steal one last guilty look at all the others still at their desks. Then she ran.

As she sprinted towards Leicester Square tube station she promised herself that she'd get the job done on her laptop at home as soon as she got back from the gig.

She arrived at Wembley twenty-four minutes late. Nick was standing near the entrance, talking on his phone, frowning. He grinned briefly at her, but then his eyes shifted away as he nodded to the person at the other end.

She touched his arm briefly and stood waiting for him to wind up the conversation, but he turned fractionally away from her, clearly indicating he wanted privacy.

Jen suddenly regretted not sending the text. She'd just compromised her position at Channel 7, bust a gut to get here, run all the way from the station, and now he was turning his back on her. Fuming, she wandered into the crowded entrance lobby and began rifling through the merch table. They were charging a fortune for band T-shirts, but – what the hell?

She was just handing over a wad of cash when she felt a pair of strong arms round her waist.

‘Hey, sweetheart,’ he murmured into her neck. ‘What happened to you? I thought I’d been stood up.’

She felt her shoulders involuntarily relax – all the day’s tensions suddenly dissolving at his touch, and her fury forgotten. ‘Sorry, Nick. Got stuck at work.’

‘Honestly, Jen, your work sounds worse than mine. Come on – let’s go in!’

Jen stuffed the new T-shirt into her bag and allowed herself to be pulled through the rammed auditorium. They had arranged to meet early to get a good spot near the stage and though they’d now missed any hope of being right at the front, they still managed to get reasonably close.

‘So who were you talking to?’ She had to shout to be heard above the warm-up soundtrack.

‘Work call,’ he shouted back non-committally.

And that was probably the last bit of conversation they succeeded in making for the next three hours. Soon the support act (Underground Pirates) were thrashing through their set and at last Livid Turkey erupted on to the stage, claiming undivided attention.

When the pounding rhythms and screaming applause had finally died down, Jen and Nick emerged, hoarse but elated, their ears ringing, their legs aching and their heads buzzing. Nick had brought his car, and though it took them ages to get out of the car park, Jen wallowed in the bliss of not having to fight through the swarm of fans to the tube.

She sat next to him, trying not to spoil the moment with thoughts of the disk sitting in her pocket. Instead she considered

his impressive profile as it flashed into life each time a car headlight swerved past: strong nose and chin, sensitive mouth . . . unexpectedly sensitive – for a policeman. She shook her head in bewilderment. What on earth was she doing with a policeman? How'd that happened?

She hadn't told her flatmate, Debs, yet. And she definitely hadn't mentioned it to her parents. Why not? Why was she so weirded out by it? She knew why. Because people like her didn't go out with policemen. They went out with other journalists. Photographers. Film-makers. She did have one friend who had briefly dated a lawyer, but that was as near to the blue line as any of them had got.

'You're very quiet,' he said suddenly. 'Had a tough day?'

'Not nearly as tough as the night's going to be,' she sighed. 'I've got a massive pile of work to do when I get back.'

'Ah well – that makes me feel better. I have to head off to the station when I've dropped you.'

'I thought you had the night off?'

'Yeah – so did I,' he muttered.

'Trouble?' she asked.

He turned and grinned at her. 'I can see your antennae twitching, Jen. You don't honestly think you'll get me to spill my guts to a news journalist, do you? However seductive she is,' he added, running his finger along her thigh.

'I wasn't fishing for a story,' she humphed indignantly. But that wasn't strictly true. She was always fishing for a story. And she'd known when she'd met him tonight that something was up.

She snuggled into his shoulder. 'Anyway, I don't want to think about work. Have you got any time off this weekend?'

He shrugged. 'I'll call you as soon as I know. Why? Is her ladyship letting you out to play?'

'Who knows?' groaned Jen. 'Do you know something, Nick? Sometimes I just feel like chucking it all in and getting a decent job with sensible hours, working with nice people who let you out of the office occasionally to have a life.'

'No you don't,' he smirked, and pulled into her street.

She watched him from the doorway as he drove off, wondering whether she was still so interested in him because she never got to spend enough time with him. Turning reluctantly back into her hallway, she started climbing the four flights to her flat.

Debs was sprawled on the sofa, channel-hopping.

'All alone?' she frowned, as Jen slumped down next to her.

'We've both got to work,' growled Jen bitterly.

'So – who is this guy?'

'I told you . . . his name's Nick,' Jen snapped, getting up from the sofa to retrieve her laptop.

But Debs refused to be stonewalled. 'And what is it Nick does that he has to go back to work on a Friday night?'

Jen opened her laptop and slipped the disk inside. She tried to look engrossed in her login screen.

'Jen! We've known each other for seven years – we don't have secrets. Now tell me – or I'll start to worry you're dating a psycho – or . . .'

The sudden silence forced Jen to look up.

Debs was staring at her friend, her eyes wide.

'Or what? Spit it out, Debs.'

'He's not married, is he?'

'Of course not!'

‘So what’s wrong with him?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with him.’

‘Well, what’s the big secret, then?’

‘There’s no big secret.’ Jen knew it was hopeless. She couldn’t hold out against this level of attack. ‘OK – he’s a policeman . . . Well – a detective. A detective inspector, in fact.’

‘You’re kidding, right?’ Debs didn’t need to say more.

Jen instantly bristled. ‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘Well – nothing, I guess. Just – a bit unexpected . . . How’d you meet?’

‘We actually first met about three months ago. Through work.’

‘What work?’

‘A shoot.’

Debs was sensing a certain reluctance in her friend. So she persisted relentlessly. ‘What shoot?’

‘Oh – you probably won’t remember the story . . .’

‘Try me.’

‘OK,’ sighed Jen. ‘The one with the weird disappearing motorcyclist.’

‘Oh? You mean the humiliating story you nearly lost your job over? Hmmm . . . I think I may just about remember that one.’

Jen shuffled uncomfortably. ‘I didn’t exactly nearly lose my job.’

Debs shook her head and snorted.

Jen was so regretting this conversation. ‘Look – I still believe something very weird happened that day . . .’

‘Just don’t say that out loud anywhere else. They’ll have you in a straitjacket.’

‘Debs – there were *nine* eyewitnesses.’

‘Er – for about an hour . . .’

‘No. They stuck to their story for ages.’

‘I think – if you consult your notes – you’ll recollect that they stuck to their story just long enough to get you and the TV crew drooling over them and broadcasting it, yet – uncannily – their conviction disappeared the moment the police started to question them,’ pressed Debs ruthlessly.

‘Well – I still think they just lost confidence,’ protested Jen.

‘Ha!’ exploded Debs. ‘They lost confidence in the story that they had witnessed the complete *evaporation* of a bleeding, dying motorcyclist! Er – I wonder why? . . . Oh my God!’ she suddenly gasped. ‘Nick was one of those detectives?’

Jen’s expression confirmed it.

‘He was the one that completely rubbished your *X-Files* woo-woo paranormal explanation. Am I right?’

‘It wasn’t quite like that –’

Well, not exactly. Jen cringed at the memory of that day. Damn Debs for bringing it up.

It had all started out so promising. Exciting. Amanda had been away in Abu Dhabi covering the Future Energy Summit and most of the other reporters were out filming the Docklands warehouse fire. So when the call came in about this strange little story, Hugo (head of Home News) had said Jen could cover it. She’d been thrilled. It was the first report at Channel 7 she’d been assigned lead position on.

‘I’ll put Kishoor on filming and streambox,’ he added.

Jen had breathed a sigh of relief. At least there’d be someone around with some experience. They’d set off almost immediately and were the first news team there. The police had already

closed the road and cordoned off the smashed-up bike. Nicholas Mullard – the detective in charge – was standing inside the taped area, wearing a pair of latex gloves and talking to the forensics team.

Crowds were beginning to gather, so while Kishoor set up the tripod and live feed links, Jen had to quickly work out who were actual witnesses and who weren't. When she'd located the key bystanders, she began asking them what they'd seen. They were pretty shaken, but keen enough to share. Only one man had seen the impact itself: the biker had hit a pedestrian, violently swerved and been thrown clear of his motorbike. But the bike had then followed his trajectory and ploughed straight into him.

When Jen had asked about the pedestrian, the witness was sure he'd seen him get up. Someone else thought it was the pedestrian who had gone over to help the motorcyclist. Nobody was quite certain about that. But they were all consistent about what happened next. Two separate calls went out for an ambulance, which took ages to arrive, though there'd been some sort of medic around to administer emergency first aid.

Jen had looked everywhere for him, but he too had disappeared. Someone said she'd seen him run off when the ambulance got there. Another thought he'd gone before the ambulance arrived. Nobody was very sure.

The only thing all nine were completely, unequivocally unanimous about was that they had seen the biker's body dematerialize before their eyes. Their conviction was unnerving and utterly compelling.

As the story had broken just an hour before their programme aired, Hugo had taken Kishoor's footage straight through to

the studio. They filmed the smashed-up bike and the pile of clothes lying in a man-shaped heap by the side of the road. Whichever way you looked at it, the images were bizarre and sinister.

Jen had stuck the microphone towards Nick Mullard as he scoured the site, asking him what he thought. He had simply shaken his head and refused to comment.

‘How can I express an opinion before I’ve collected evidence or statements?’ he’d asked, reasonably enough. So she’d followed the procession to the police station and, while statements were being taken, had begun her live broadcast just outside, speculating into camera about possible explanations for the biker’s disappearance. The problem was that once she’d lost the compelling, bewildered faces of the witnesses it was impossible to come up with anything that sounded even half credible.

So although she was pretty sure she’d stumbled on to something genuinely uncanny – possibly the major story of her career – she found herself standing in front of a live TV camera with nothing convincing to say. But the studio presenter was asking her to come up with a theory, so she ploughed on.

Probably her speculations along the alien abduction line (a witness theory that hadn’t sounded nearly so ludicrous at the roadside) hadn’t helped. Neither had the spontaneous combustion theory she moved on to next. But the final nail in the coffin came when the first witness emerged from the interview room.

With overwhelming relief, Jen and her microphone had pounced on him. But instead of rescuing her and reaffirming the events, he categorically refused to comment, wouldn’t make eye contact and scurried quickly away. When exactly the same

pattern repeated with witness two, the editor cut Jen off, and she knew that her story had collapsed and she'd successfully committed reporter-suicide on live TV. Her first (and last) stab at leading a story had ended in catastrophic humiliation.

'God – I can't believe you two got together – from across the barricades! How did *that* happen?'

Jen blinked. Damn, Debs was still there, smirking.

'I don't want to talk about it,' hissed Jen furiously.

'Oh, come on, hun, I'm your best friend!'

Jen wondered briefly whether having a best friend was such a privilege.

'I've got work to do,' she sniffed. Her disk had loaded and the Eurozone currency statistics she was supposed to be reading were blinking at her in alphabetical order.

Suddenly Debs's hand shot across the keyboard and the screen went black.

'Bloody hell, Debs – what do you think you're doing?'

'I'm patiently waiting to hear how my friend Jennifer Linden – TV reporter and believer in all things paranormal – hooked up with a cynical, rational, hard-nosed police detective.'

Jen snorted with fury. 'I am NOT a believer in all things paranormal – you make me sound like a complete moron – I am just as rational as Nick bloody Mullard. I simply happen to know that something inexplicable happened that day.'

'So what's Nick's take on it?'

Jen looked down at her laptop longingly. Even currency stats were more appealing than this conversation.

'We haven't discussed it.'

Debs blinked at her in silence. Waiting.

'Well – it just hasn't come up.'

Debs continued to stare in disbelief.

How could she tell Debs that she wasn't even sure Nick realized that she was the idiot reporter on that story? She hadn't dared remind him.

When she'd met Nick five weeks ago – at the big One Earth demo in Parliament Square – she had accidentally smiled at him. She'd remembered his face but had momentarily forgotten where from. He had smiled back (she thought probably for the same reason) and they had somehow got talking. And that was that. The longer it went on, the more awkward it was to bring up.

She hauled her laptop out from under Debs's hands and took it off to her bedroom. At least she knew where she was with the currency crisis.

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