

CHAPTER 1

Jane looked out of the window. Yes, there she was again, her sister-in-law, sitting on chair on the front lawn, looking at the town that lay further down the hill and across it out to the sea. For some reason, seeing her sister-in-law sitting there each afternoon caused her a sense of unease.

"There she is again, Frank," said Jane to her husband, "your sister – just sitting out there on the lawn. What's she looking at? Why does she do it?"

"I don't know," replied Frank. "Perhaps she just likes the view or perhaps she's remembering the time she used to live here. Who knows?"

"It gives me the creeps somehow," said Jane. "Some one in their late eighties shouldn't be sitting out there in the late afternoon like that. She's so still. It's as though I were looking a ghost there."

"Now don't take on, old girl," said Frank, comfortingly. "It's a warm afternoon and the evenings have been balmy. My sister's as fit as a fiddle, despite her age. You needn't worry about her."

"But she's a strange one, all the same," said Jane. "I know this is where you and she were born and where you were both brought up as children. But she hasn't lived here for more than sixty years now. It's as though she's returned to die in the place where she was born."

"Well, perhaps she has," replied Frank, "is that really so bad? When the time comes, wouldn't you rather end your days among people you know?"

"People you know!" exclaimed Jane. "Before last month, we hadn't seen her since our wedding day; and that was more than fifty years ago. And where had she been? Had she lived all that time in India? I think in all those years we had only three postcards from her."

"I know, I know," replied Frank. "But Sheila was always a loaner even when we were kids. I don't suppose it helped that I was eleven years her junior. A scruffy young boy is hardly endearing to a teenage girl."

"No, I don't suppose you would have been," agreed Jane, with a laugh. "Oh well, I suppose you're right."

"Yes," said Frank. "Just let her be. Come on, old thing, let's put the kettle for some tea."

"Less of the 'old thing', please," said Jane, laughing, as she went off to the kitchen.

Out in the garden Sheila just sat there looking. Where were the fields she had played in when she was young? All she could see to left and right as she looked towards the sea were houses, houses and houses. The fields had gone; the village she remembered had gone. It was just one sprawling town below her now. It was all so very different; she did not like it.

She looked out to the sea. The sea, she thought, would always be there; that would not change. But she did not want to go to the seaside where she had gone as a child. She knew without going that it would all be very different now; she would not like it.

She took comfort in that the house had changed less; but it had of course changed. Outside as she had approached it three weeks ago it had for a moment looked almost as though it had remained the same; but then

she started to notice differences; and inside there had been many changes. It was a confusing mix of familiar and unfamiliar. That was to be expected, she supposed, after all this time.

It was good of Frank and Jane to let her come and stay. It must, she thought, be particularly trying for Jane as they had only met once before. Yes, she should have made a much greater effort to have kept in touch. How many times had she written to them since they married all that time ago? Was it three – four? She could not remember, but she knew it was very few.

Yes, she thought again, I really should have done more to keep in touch. Why! I could even have made an effort to get back to Britain to see them on the odd occasion. To think they've brought up three children of their own here and those children have gone – have families of their own. What will they make of an aunt and great-aunt who's appeared from nowhere?

'From nowhere,' she repeated to herself. She sat there watching the sky as the sun began to sink beneath the horizon.

There shining like a lonely bright star was the planet Venus, the Evening Star. It looked lovely there shining alone in the evening sky. But she knew that was merely a reflection from the clouds of sulphuric acid that trapped its dense atmosphere beneath them – an atmosphere mostly of carbon dioxide which made its surface dry and dusty and unbearably hot. Yes, she thought to herself, beautiful you may look, Venus, but that's just a trap. You're deadly to those who have ventured there.

Sheila sat there in the warm, balmy evening, watching as more and more stars gradually appeared. This was her favorite time of the day, when she could forget the cares of the world and be alone with the stars. Among the stars, she thought, that is where I belong.

She found great comfort gazing at the stars above her as they filled sky. She hated those occasions when clouds covered the sky and she could not see her stars. Then she felt claustrophobic.

Why have I been so blessed? she thought. Or is it a curse rather than a blessing?

No, she thought, not a curse. I would not have missed the Grand Quest, though perhaps I should occasionally have taken some time out to visit my brother and his family.

She thought about the niece and two nephews she had not yet seen. Would they believe her if she told them about the Quest: the places she had been, the things she had seen, the deeds she had done? No, they would probably not; nor, she was sure, would Frank and Jane believe her, though perhaps Frank would try to. They would surely think it was the imaginings of a rather silly and confused old woman.

Would they be right? Was it all her imagination? Had she really been to those places, seen those things, *done* those things? It seemed hardly possible. Perhaps she had imagined it all.

But, no! She was not silly; she was not confused. She *had* seen those things; she had been to those places, done those things, met those people. Of all that she was absolutely certain as she sat there beneath the stars.

Her grandnieces and grandnephews – they would believe her. They

would love the stories she could tell them. But that would surely cause a problem. Their parents would say she was crazy and might try to keep them away. She would have to tell the things as though they were just stories. She hoped she had more years ahead of her so she could share the stories with the children.

She sighed. If only grown-ups were more trusting and could open up their minds, she thought.

When did it begin? she asked herself. When I was thirteen? I remember that well. But no, that was not the beginning. It was earlier than then; it must have been earlier as Frank had not been born when it started.

She thought hard.

I remember, she said to herself. Yes, I was only seven. It was on an evening like this – warm and starlit. I thought the stars glowed like jewels in the sky. I longed to be among the stars. I opened my mind to those stars.

That's it, she thought, I opened my mind. That's when I first heard Tlemprit; her voice came into my open mind.

She knew that 'voice' and 'hear' were not the right words. But that is what it had felt like to her at the time. Perhaps, she had often wondered, it was what people call telepathy or perhaps it was something else entirely. It could not, of course, have been a voice carrying over the vastness of space from one galaxy to another. She knew that would be absurd. But a thought was different matter. She wondered how fast and how far a thought could travel.

She was aware of someone coming out from the house. That will be Frank, she thought to herself; he will be bringing me a sherry and he will stay with me a while as he drinks his. It was his way of letting her know he thought she should be coming in. It was, she thought, very sweet of him.

But she still had a few more moments to herself. She closed her eyes. Eighty years dropped away; she was the young girl of seven and she heard once more Tlemprit calling her.