

Its Last Song

The City was built on a sharp mountain that jutted improbably from the sea, and the sea kept trying to claim it back. When the tide rose, it swallowed up the City's lower streets. When the tide fell, it spat them back out again, but left its mark. Fresh mussels clung to windowsills. Fish flailed on the cobblestones. That grey morning, once the tide had retreated, a whale was found on a rooftop.

A crowd gathered along the top of the sea wall, to gape at the roof below.

'It's an evil omen!' yelled the old preacher, his breath steaming in the air.

'The Enemy didn't do this,' snorted a sailor. 'It must have got stuck there at high tide.'

'It's dead,' said a merchant. 'Do you think we can sell it for meat?'

The whale lay on its belly, stretched from one end of the roof to the other. It had beached itself on the Chapel of St Bartholomew, whose rooftop poked above the waves at low tide. Four stone gargoyles stood at each corner, two of them digging sharply into the whale's skin. Hungry seagulls screeched overhead.

The crowd were so engrossed that none of them noticed the girl's arrival. She had tired eyes and tangled, dirty blonde hair, mussed-up from a night of broken sleep. She leaned over the sea wall and bit her lip.

'It's too big to be out of the water,' she said, speaking more to herself than anyone else. 'It'll have crushed its lungs just by lying there.'

A tiny, wide-eyed boy next to her looked up in horror. He nestled close to his mother's side, watching the girl warily. Her face was pale, with three red scratches down one cheek, and she smelled faintly of fireworks. What was worse, she was dressed like a man, and not an upstanding one either. She wore a frayed crimson scarf, and a coat that was long and hooded, stitched together from weathered cloth and grey sealskin.

'Wh-who are you?' said the boy, his lips quivering.

'I'm Ellie,' said the girl distractedly, rummaging in her coat pockets. She pulled out a magnifying glass, an onion, and finally a penknife with a razor-sharp edge. The boy reached for his mother's hand.

‘If we don’t cut this whale open soon,’ said Ellie, holding up the knife, ‘it will explode.’

The boy began to cry.

‘Watch your mouth, girl!’ said his mother.

‘No, really, it will!’ said Ellie, raising her hands. ‘Dead whales start to decay from the inside. There will be a dangerous build-up of gas.’

The mother turned away, covering her mouth with the back of her hand.

‘I *know!*’ said Ellie. ‘There’ll be guts everywhere. And you wouldn’t believe the smell! Hmm,’ she added, staring down at the penknife. ‘On second thoughts . . .’

Ellie turned to a second girl standing behind her. She looked to be the same age, twelve or thirteen maybe, with a mess of curly ginger hair. She wore a huge woollen blue jumper, heavy black boots, and a bored expression.

‘Anna, I need you to run back to the workshop and get my flensing tool,’ said Ellie.

‘What’s a flensing tool?’ said Anna, yawning.

‘It’s a sharp blade on the end of a long pole,’ said Ellie. ‘It’s in the loft beside the bookcases, hanging below a telescope and a rifle.’

‘*You* have a rifle?’ said Anna, leaning forward, suddenly interested. ‘And bullets?’

‘Just hurry, all right!’ said Ellie, and Anna rolled her eyes and slouched off up the street.

Ellie hopped on to the sea wall, then dropped down the other side. The crowd gasped as she landed on the roof of the chapel ten feet below.

‘What is she *doing*?’ said a woman.

Ellie held out her hands to steady herself, stepping along the rooftop like a tightrope walker. The whale’s eyes were closed, eyelids wrinkled and creased like those of an old man. She knelt, drawing one hand delicately along the whale’s side. Its skin was hard, covered in white barnacles and criss-crosses of scar tissue.

‘What’s going on here?’ said a voice above. Ellie glanced up and saw a young city guardsman nudging his way through the crowd, gawky and big-eared, dressed in a black cap and dark blue greatcoat.

‘There’s a whale on the roof,’ said a woman.

‘That girl’s gone down to it,’ said another.

‘*What?*’ the guardsman said, then he looked down and noticed Ellie on the roof. ‘What . . . what is she doing?’ He clapped his hands to his head. ‘Watch out, miss! That whale will eat you!’

‘Whales don’t eat people,’ Ellie sighed, but no one heard. They were all talking over each other now.

The whale’s massive body rose and fell beneath her hand, as it drew a ragged breath.

It was still alive!

Ellie looked around, wondering if it was possible to get the whale back in the water. A ship might have been able

to pull it free when the tide came back in, but that was hours away.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered. ‘I wish I could help.’

As she spoke, Ellie thought she heard something faint coming from inside the whale. The clamour of the crowd made it impossible to be sure.

‘Get away from it!’ the guardsman yelled, though he seemed too afraid to climb down to the roof himself.

‘I think you should drag her off.’

‘Someone call the Inquisition!’

‘Please, I’m trying to listen!’ said Ellie.

‘The preacher said whales could breathe fire.’

‘*Please!*’ Ellie yelled, but no one paid her any attention. She pulled a marble-sized device from her pocket, wrapped in yellowed paper. With a flick of her wrist she hurled it up at the sea wall. There was a *crack* and a flash of light, and a riot of frenzied screeching as the seagulls fled. The crowd staggered back and shielded their eyes, shocked into silence.

Ellie held up her hand. ‘*Listen,*’ she said.

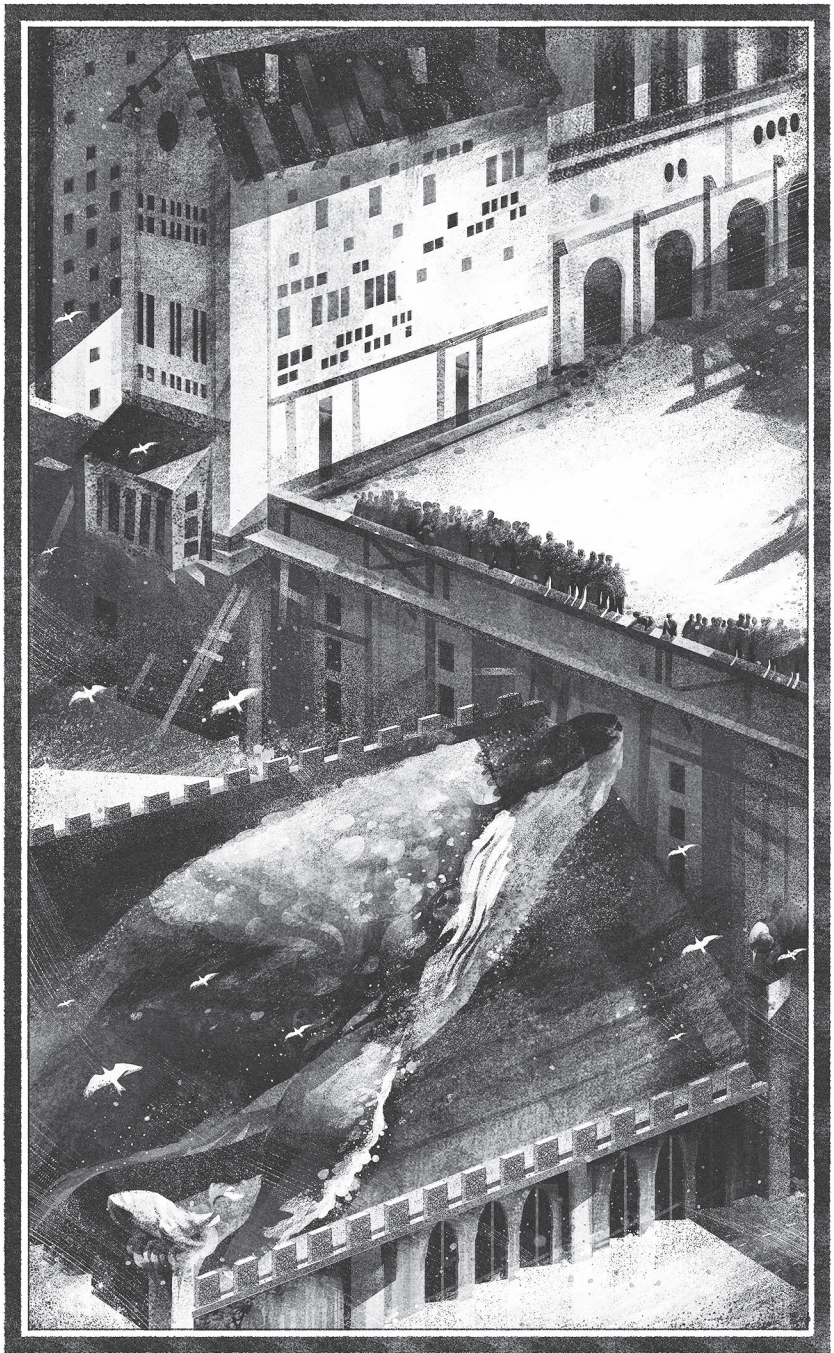
And so they all did.

And in the silence they could hear it, drifting towards them.

It was the whale.

The whale was singing.

It was a mournful, melodious rise and fall, reverberating from deep within the creature. Ellie had heard whales sing



before, but never one out of water. She had thought it was part of some mating ritual, yet here was this dying whale, singing, for whose benefit she could not guess.

They all listened in awe, for many long minutes.

Then the whale opened its eye.

‘Incredible,’ Ellie whispered. The eye was the dark blue of a cold sea. It focused on her – she could have sworn it – and all she knew was its gaze, and that song. And for those few, wondrous moments, all the pain inside her seemed to go away.

The song grew quieter, as if it were drifting off to the horizon. The eye closed. The tail stopped moving.

And all was silent, even the sea.

‘I’ve got it!’ yelled Anna triumphantly, pushing her way to the sea wall, holding the flensing tool over her head. The crowd turned to look at her. ‘What?’ she asked, then handed the tool down to Ellie, blunt end first.

‘What are you going to do?’ the guardsman called.

Ellie pointed to the whale’s belly. ‘I’ll have to cut it open, low down. That will prevent any gas building up inside.’

Ellie rested the tool upon one of the many grooves that ran lengthways along the whale’s white belly, and pressed. The skin was tough and thick and she was soon sweating from the effort. Finally, the blade punctured the skin, and Ellie almost lost her balance as it sank into the soft organs underneath. A rank smell seeped from the wound and Ellie

held her breath. She worked the flensing tool back and forth, cutting down the creature's side. The flesh parted, purple guts drooping from the opening.

'*Ooh*, look at all that blood,' called Anna. 'Can I have a go?'

'It smells awful,' said Ellie. 'But I suppose so. Just be –'
She stopped.

'Anna, what's wrong?' she said.

Anna's face had contorted, her eyes fixed in disbelief.

'Sweet mercy,' said the guardsman, his hand at his mouth.

There was a confused muttering from the crowd. An old lady screamed. For some reason, Ellie found she couldn't move.

Her body stiffened. The flensing tool fell from her fingers. She looked down.

Something was holding her by the ankle.

It was skinny and trembling, and slicked with thick blood.

A hand reaching out from the cut in the whale.



From the Belly of the Whale

The old preacher flung his hands skywards.
‘It’s back!’ he shrieked, fleeing along the sea wall towards the streets above. ‘The Enemy has returned!’

‘Oh no, oh no, oh no,’ a woman kept saying, her hands clasped round the symbol of St Celestina at her neck. A young man fainted to the cobblestones.

‘P-please, everyone, stay c-calm,’ stuttered the guardsman. ‘There’s no need to panic!’

And all Ellie could do was stare at the hand.

It gripped her ankle, freezing cold against her skin. She jerked her leg away and it slapped down hard upon the slate, leaving a bloody smear on her sock. Ellie swallowed, kneeling to inspect the hand, and the arm it was connected to. The hand was groping across the roof, as if searching for something else to hold. The arm was lean and wiry and

led back into the whale, vanishing between fat purple organs.

‘Hey!’

Ellie turned to see Anna clambering over the top of the sea wall.

‘Stop!’ the guardsman shouted, squeezing through the crowd towards Anna. ‘Come back here!’ He lunged towards her and managed to get hold of her woollen jumper.

Ellie touched the hand with the tip of her finger. It flinched away from her like a skittish animal. Ellie took a deep breath, then grabbed it. It was sticky and crusty against her fingers. She dug her heels into the rooftop, and pulled.

The hand stopped struggling and the fingers curled round hers. She didn’t want to pull too hard, in case the person inside was caught against something. But the rest of the arm came easily.

Then a shoulder came too, bony and bloody.

Then tangled black hair. A head. A face.

A boy, gasping for breath.

The crowd cried out. Anna broke free of the guardsman’s grip, dropping down from the sea wall and skidding towards Ellie. She stared at the boy in shock.

‘What *is* that?’

The boy rolled on to the roof, trailing ropes of whale entrails. He was entirely naked.

‘Are you dying?’ Ellie said, shaking his shoulders. His

eyes were closed, and he didn't seem able to breathe. His mouth kept opening and sucking at the air, but it was like he'd never drawn breath before.

'I think he's dying,' said Anna.

'Look at me!' Ellie said to the boy. 'Open your eyes!'

But he just thrashed back and forth in a tangle of limbs. Ellie pressed down on his shoulders to hold him still. His skin was sticky and smelled of iron filings.

'Get his legs!' she shouted, and Anna fell down flat on his kicking feet. Ellie sat on his chest, his nails clawing blindly at her coat. Grimacing, she put her thumb and finger to his eyelids and forced them open. The eyes stared upward, rolling back like a blood-maddened shark's.

'Look at me,' Ellie said.

The boy growled.

'Look at me!'

His eyes flashed down and found her. Ellie gasped.

Grey-blue. The colour of a cold sea.

She blinked hard, trying to focus. 'Listen,' she said, as calmly as she could manage. 'I need you to do as I do.'

She inhaled slowly through her nose, exaggerating the sound, a hand on her chest to demonstrate how it rose with her breath. She exhaled gently through her mouth, and could see him trying to copy her. But his nostrils flared uncertainly. It wasn't working.

'Keep him still,' she told Anna. She knelt by his side and pinched his nose, holding tight even when he shook his

head furiously. She clamped her lips to his, and breathed deeply into his mouth.

A woman shrieked from the sea wall.

‘What are you doing!’ the guardsman cried. He had at last managed to scramble down to the rooftop, but stood paralysed by horror. Ellie came up for breath, then put her lips to the boy’s again. He stared at her as she did it, his eyes wide. A third time she drew a deep breath and shared it with him, and a fourth, and a fifth.

Then, as she took a sixth breath, the boy’s mouth opened, and he sucked in a lungful of air. Ellie laughed in relief. The boy drew deep, shuddering breaths at first, then sped up, gulping the air hungrily.

‘Slow down,’ she warned, breathing slowly again to remind him. ‘Like this. Now stand up, and put your hands on your hips like I’m doing. It’ll open up your lungs.’

He stared at her intensely, his face sharp and menacing. Slowly, he seemed to understand, and placed his hands on his hips. Ellie looked down to check he was doing it right, then covered her eyes.

‘Sorry!’ she said. She’d forgotten he was naked. ‘Um, um . . . Could someone get us a blanket!’

The crowd shrank back. The young guardsman kept staring at the blood, his face turning paler. Ellie sighed and took off her scarf.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘You can wrap this round your . . . waist.’

The boy stared at the fabric, blinking in confusion.

‘I’ll do it!’ said Anna, snatching the scarf from Ellie’s hand and rushing at him.

‘Anna, be careful!’

The boy’s eyes flashed and he leapt at Anna, grabbing her shoulders and pushing her away. Anna tumbled into Ellie, and the boy staggered. His legs didn’t seem to work properly.

‘Get away!’ he yelled hoarsely, and fell back against the whale.

‘You can talk!’ Ellie cried, helping Anna to her feet.

The boy picked up Ellie’s scarf. After a moment’s hesitation he wrapped it round his waist, tying it at one side.

‘How did you –?’ Ellie stammered. ‘What were you –? Why were you in that whale?’

But the boy wasn’t listening. He turned and looked at the hole in the whale, seemingly unaffected by the smell. He noticed the crowd watching him in silent horror. He shivered, and Ellie remembered how cold his skin had felt.

A faded blue greatcoat landed at her feet with a thump. The young guardsman was standing ten feet away. He was deliberately not looking at the blood-covered boy, his hand held firmly over his mouth.

‘Thanks,’ said Ellie. She approached the boy and he tensed, clenching his fists. She took another small step, holding out the coat. He was skinny, yet muscular-looking, and his body heaved with every breath he drew. Ellie stepped cautiously to his side and draped the coat round his shoulders.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked.

The boy opened his mouth, closed it, and seemed disturbed by the lack of words that came out in between.

‘I think we should call him Seth,’ said Anna.

‘He’s not a pet,’ said Ellie.

‘It’s a good name. It sounds like the sea.’

Ellie shrugged. ‘Well, I suppose it will do until you remember your real one. Mine’s Ellie,’ she added. ‘Ellie Lancaster.’

She put out her hand for the boy to shake, and he stared at it and did nothing.

‘Here, let’s get that whale blood off you.’ Ellie retrieved a handkerchief from her pocket and soaked it in water from her hip flask. ‘Do you mind?’ she said, the cloth poised by his face.

Again he did nothing, which Ellie took to mean he didn’t mind. With careful movements, she wiped his brow, his cheeks, his chin, revealing a boy around the same age as Ellie and Anna, his face unblemished save for tiny crinkles at the sides of his eyes, like he smiled a lot, and a single crease on his brow, like he frowned a lot too. He had thick black eyebrows and a mess of black, blood-soaked hair. He had a prominent, high-bridged nose, wide cheekbones, and his skin was light brown. He stared at her with his large sea-blue eyes, and Ellie found she couldn’t look away.

Anna barged her with one shoulder.

‘Ow! Right, um, we should get you somewhere warm.’

The boy glared at his hands. 'Where am I?' he asked. His voice was harsh like sandpaper.

'The Angelus Waterfront,' said Ellie.

'Waterfront . . .' he said. 'Waterfront of what?'

This boy really was confused. 'Of the City.'

'Which city?'

Ellie stared at him, puzzled and a little frightened. There was only one City.

She pointed upward, so that he could see it towering above them. The City. A mountainous grey roost of ancient buildings, swarming with squawking seagulls. The boy's gaze flitted from chimney to gargoyle, following the serrated lines of streets and stairways that cut down from the peak of the City to the sea. He stared at three little rowing boats tied to metal hoops, swaying in the gentle tug of the waves. He looked out to the horizon, then winced.

'What's that noise?' he said. 'Where is that noise coming from?'

He put his hands to his ears, gritting his teeth. Anna and Ellie shared a glance.

'Where are my brothers and sisters?' he asked.

'Um . . .' Ellie scratched her head. 'I . . . I don't know?'

There was a commotion on the sea wall. Ellie could hear the old preacher returning from the streets above, talking eagerly in his shrill voice.

'It's the Enemy!' he screeched. 'I was just leading a

funeral at the Church of St Horace, you see, Master Inquisitor, when I heard all this uproar.'

'What's happening?' said Seth.

'An Inquisitor's coming,' said Ellie, toying nervously with a hole in her coat sleeve. 'But don't worry, you'll be fine. Unless it's—'

The crowd parted. People were falling over each other to keep their distance from the new arrival.

'Oh no,' said Ellie.

A powerfully built man appeared at the sea wall, taller than anyone in the crowd. He wore a black sealskin greatcoat that spilled down to his ankles and a silver chain across his chest. He had a thick neck and broad shoulders and a face that was pale and puffy, haunted by a shadow of handsomeness that had been lost along the way. His eyes were deep, dark pits, and held no expression. He looked like a corpse for whom death was a small inconvenience.

Seth raised an eyebrow. 'Who's that?'

'He's . . .' Ellie's mouth was dry. 'Inquisitor Hargrath.'

'I had just arrived,' the preacher prattled on, 'when this *boy* burst from a whale. It must be the work of the Enemy.'

'Silence,' Hargrath rumbled. 'I will judge that for myself.'

A balding, diminutive man dropped to his knees in front of Hargrath. 'Saint Killian!' he cried. 'Save us!'

'On your feet,' Hargrath said. 'I'm not a saint yet. Only dead men get to be saints.'

He vaulted over the sea wall, his black boots crunching

slate as he landed on the roof. His eyes swept from Seth, to the hole in the whale, then back again.

He took two steps towards Seth, but, after a moment's pause, took a small step back. It was odd to see such a monster of a man hesitate before this skinny, barely dressed boy, yet Ellie almost thought she saw fear flicker in Hargrath's dead eyes. With his right hand, Hargrath rubbed absently at the empty left sleeve of his greatcoat, which lay folded in half against his body, held by a silver pin. The arm that should have been inside it had since been taken from him.

'What do you want?' said Seth. He spoke like a grown man, in a serious, commanding tone.

'What were you doing inside that whale?' said Hargrath.

'Sir, the boy's done nothing wrong.' Ellie stepped quickly between them. 'He was stuck in that whale – I had to rescue him.'

Hargrath showed no sign of hearing Ellie, or seeing her either. His eyes drifted impassively over Seth, like a butcher deciding how to carve up a carcass. 'Do you see it, child?' he asked Seth, in a quiet growl.

Seth frowned. 'See what?'

'The Enemy.'

'Who?'

'The God Who Drowned the Gods. It's been speaking to you, hasn't it? It saved you from this whale?'

‘I saved him from the whale,’ said Ellie. Still Hargrath ignored her.

‘Only the Vessel could survive being inside a whale,’ he said.

‘What’s the Vessel?’ said Seth.

‘You are,’ said Hargrath.

‘That’s ridiculous,’ said Ellie. ‘What would the Vessel be doing inside a whale?’

Hargrath’s hand moved towards the hilt of his sword. Ellie breathed in sharply. Seth’s whole body tensed, his hands clenching to tight fists.

Hargrath reached past his weapon and into his coat pocket. He took out a small pistol, and Ellie barely had time to cry out before he pointed it at Seth and pulled the trigger.

‘No!’

There was no gunshot, just a sharp hiss, and something embedded itself in Seth’s neck with a thick thud. Seth clutched at it – a metal dart protruding by three inches. He fell to his knees. Ellie caught hold of him, but he was heavy, his eyes shut, and he tumbled through her arms to the slate.

‘What did you do to him!’ she cried, putting two fingers beneath his chin to check he still had a pulse.

Hargrath returned the pistol to his pocket. ‘A sedative,’ he said. ‘Your mother’s greatest invention. If the Vessel is unconscious, he can’t ask the Enemy to save him, when we burn him on the fire.’

Ellie's stomach twisted. 'He's *not* the Vessel,' she said. 'You're making a mistake.'

'Don't try my patience, Lancaster.' He shoved Ellie away from Seth, and Anna ran to catch her. Hargrath lifted Seth easily with one hand, draping him over his shoulder, then strode back towards the sea wall. Ellie chased after him, her heart pounding.

'This is all wrong! He's not the Vessel – he's just a *boy*. You're . . . you're just frightened of a little boy! Coward!'

Hargrath stopped. He looked up at the crowd, who watched him with their hands to their mouths. He dropped Seth roughly at his feet, and the crowd jumped back as if the boy were a live firework. He turned and strode back to Ellie. His hand shot out and gripped her by the neck, driving her to the edge of the roof.

'You've never seen the Enemy, child,' he said, lifting her so they were face to face. 'But I have. I saw it burst out of the Vessel. It took my arm, even as I plunged my sword through its throat. While my friends lay dead around me. I see it still, when I close my eyes. And the worst part . . . is that I *knew* that Vessel. He was a good, kind man. Yet from him emerged a creature of nightmare.'

Hargrath gripped Ellie's neck tighter. She batted desperately at his arm, coughing for air.

'Anyone can be the Vessel,' he said.

Out of the corner of her eye, Ellie saw Anna rushing at

Hargrath, only to be knocked back by a nudge of his shoulder, sending her tumbling. Ellie's vision crowded with white dots. Her thoughts turned hazy.

'Anyone. Little boys, little girls. And I'd kill them all to keep the City safe.'

And with that he smiled, and dropped her into the sea.

From the Diary of Claude Hestermeyer

After the funeral, I didn't know what to do with myself. I left St Horace's and walked back to my dusty study in the university – the study I'd shared with Peter. I sat at my desk, staring at his empty armchair. My heart felt like a small, hard apple in my chest.

I was so distracted that it was a moment before I noticed the man standing by the door. I couldn't see his face. He was wearing a black veil for some reason.

'Excuse me,' I told him, 'I appreciate you coming to offer your condolences, but I said all there was to say at Peter's funeral. Now please leave me in peace.'

'Professor Claude Hestermeyer,' said the man, in a deep voice.

'That's my name, yes,' I replied. 'Saying it does not excuse the rude way you've barged into my office.'

'Don't you recognize my voice?'

I didn't, but I *did* notice the way my fingers were

trembling, and the tingling sensation running up and down my spine.

‘Sir, I’m afraid I must insist you leave,’ I demanded.

‘That’s not how this arrangement works,’ said the man.

‘Arrangement? What arrangement? Is this some cruel joke? Peter Lambeth was cremated today – show some respect!’

Tears trickled hotly down my cheeks. I stood up and marched round my desk, prepared to use force if necessary. But before I got close the man pulled the black veil from his face.

I snapped the pencil I was holding.

There, standing before me, was my dear friend Peter Lambeth.