

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER ONE

A MEDIUM RARE

As an arrow nearly parted his hair and others buried themselves in the ground or whistled through the bamboo above, Joe buried his head in the long grass and wondered just how he had got himself in this position. Just an hour or two ago he had been in the town library changing his books and looking forward to a quiet day and a read in the sun. Now here he was with a lot of heavily armed warriors on horseback determined to fill him full of arrows or spike him with long wicked looking spears. He glanced at his companion, who was doing the same as he was - trying to make herself as small as possible by burying herself in the grass and leaves under the bamboo stalks that swayed above them.

Sarah, Joe's companion, was thinking that her father was right - her aunt *was* weird, so weird that she should be avoided like the plague. Another arrow whistled an inch or so above her head and she wished she had never volunteered to change her aunt's great thick books in the library that day. Apart from anything else, she could have done with a couple of those books to put over her head - they were so thick and heavy they were bound to stop one of those arrows.

They both thought back to the library - that haven of relative peace and quiet where they had met only two hours ago. Actually, in the first week of the summer holidays the library wasn't that peaceful and the staff looked gloomily at the hoards of children milling about the shelves, sent by their parents to find some books to occupy them during their long break. As far as the library staff were concerned the end of the holidays couldn't come soon enough. Still, at least there weren't troops of men in armour dashing about on small shaggy ponies, their riders armed with long-bladed spears or bows that fired whistling arrows with bright feathers on one end and a nasty long point on the other. They should have been grateful. But then Joe, wondering about the shelves to find some science fiction books that he hadn't read yet, wasn't aware that it was at all likely that such things were going to happen to him in a short space of time. He had chosen a few books and walked round the end of a shelf and bumped into a fair-haired girl, who dropped two of the pile of thick books she was carrying.

"I'm sorry," said Joe, bending to pick the books up. He returned them to the top of the pile, first having a look at the titles - they were heavy books, one entitled "Parapsychology in Society Today" and the other "Alternative Realities and the Mind". "Are these yours?" he asked, impressed.

"No," laughed the girl, who was a bit taller than Joe, but about the same age, "They're my aunt's. She reads this sort of thing a lot. I'm returning them for her and picking up the next lot she's

requested. My books are on the bottom of the pile.” Joe saw that she had three smaller, thinner books under the pile of large ones. The girl glanced at Joe’s books.

“Do you like science fiction?” she asked.

Joe nodded. “Do you?” he asked.

She wrinkled her nose. “Some of it. But a lot of it seems so unreal - I mean, it’s never likely to happen, is it?”

“Um, well, I suppose that our grandparents would have said the same about computers,” replied Joe. “But some of it’s just pure imagination, although I suppose it could all happen, somewhere.”

They were at the desk by now and the assistant rapidly dealt with their books, pleased to see the back of a couple of the children in the library. He was looking forward to his coffee break and so didn’t make any fuss when the girl, who Joe saw on her library ticket was called Sarah, asked for the next lot of books her Aunt had requested.

“Strictly speaking, your Aunt should come in to collect them herself,” he said, but he accepted the other ticket Sarah gave him and passed over the books - and quite a pile they made.

“You’ll have fun carrying these home,” said the assistant with a grin. The pile was bigger - and heavier - than the one Sarah had just handed over.

“How far have you got to carry those?” asked Joe.

“To Portal Place, off Sheridan Road. Do you know it?” she replied.

“It’s on my way,” said Joe, “I’ll give you a hand if you like.”

Those were the fatal words. They were an introduction to an adventure the like of which Joe had never dreamed of - none of his science fiction books had ever suggested the sort of events that he was about to experience.

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Not that there was any hint of this as he and Sarah carried the books through the streets that lead from the library to Sarah’s Aunt’s house. It was mid-morning but the sun was already hot and the streets were dry and a bit dusty. The cars and lorries rushing past seemed to stir the dust up more and Joe hoped that Sarah’s aunt might offer them a drink. They chatted on the way - Sarah told him that her Aunt was a bit strange, or, as her father put it, dead weird. Her Aunt was her mother’s sister and her mother liked her but didn’t have a lot to do with her because she was, well, a bit strange. Sarah liked her a lot, but her parents weren’t too keen on Sarah going there too often - but then in the holidays Sarah’s mother was pleased that Sarah had somewhere else to go and wasn’t at home all the time under her feet or arguing with her little brother. Joe nodded. His mother was the same; he and his older brother just didn’t seem to get on and their quarrels drove his mum up the wall - although, as he told Sarah, it was all his brother’s fault.

She nodded and said, “It’s the same with me. I’ve got a younger brother - I’m expected to take him on the park or play with him and he can be a horror - always taking things without asking or wanting to quarrel and fight - it’s always his fault but my mum never sees that.”

Agreeing about the odd ways of parents and the awful ways of brothers, both younger and older, they carried on walking through the dry, hot streets until they came to a little hidden close off the pleasant tree-lined Sheridan Street that Joe had never realised was there before. This was Portal

Place, a cul-de-sac of about ten neat little detached houses with small front gardens behind low red brick walls. Joe noticed that for some reason number seven seemed to stand out from the other houses; he had the funny feeling that the houses on each side of number seven seemed to be shrinking away from it, although he couldn't see why. At first sight it looked like all the others but there was something about it . . . perhaps it was the curtains, very dark blue velvet with gold and silver stars glittering on them, or perhaps the fact that all the woodwork was painted a deep purple. In the garden lilies bloomed over the top of the wall, tall and rather sinister. He was a bit alarmed when Sarah made straight for number seven - this was evidently her Aunt's house. As they came closer to it, he could see that number seven had a rather unusual name plate, in the shape of a cloud with the words "Portal to The Other Side" on it.

Holding her pile of books in one hand, tucking them under her chin to steady them, Sarah opened the gate and beckoned a rather unwilling Joe through. He had a look around the little garden. Although the lilies were the only flowers you could see over the wall, as if standing guard, once you entered the gate you could see that there were lots of prettier flowers in beds around a small paved area, on which there was a stone urn full of big purple fuschias. Sarah's aunt seemed to like the colour purple. Sarah marched up to the front door, which had a very unusual knocker, of polished brass in the shape of a Red Indian chief's head complete with feather head-dress.

Joe was a bit apprehensive as Sarah knocked at the door. After all when grown-ups describe someone as weird they can mean anything from slightly strange to barking mad - and the outside of the house seemed a bit strange as it was. Just what Joe was expecting to see he wasn't sure but he was rather surprised by what he *did* see when Sarah's Aunt answered the door. She was a slim lady, of medium height, round about his mother's age, her hair gold slightly shot with grey, with very bright eyes behind large round spectacles with thin gold rims. She was wearing a short purple velvet dress and lots of silver bangles and necklaces that jangled cheerfully when she moved and made her sound like a set of walking wind chimes. She smiled when she saw Sarah.

"Hello, dear!" she said. "Come in. Is this a friend of yours? Given you a hand with the books? That is kind. I didn't think there would be so many or that they would be so heavy. It's very good of you to go for me. Come in, come in, I'm sure you would both like a drink."

She ushered them into a room at the back of the house, where a big patio window opened on to a sunny little garden full of flowers round a small area of grass. She took the books from the children and put them on a table and then showed them into a tiny kitchen. She offered them a range of drinks, fizzy ones in cans from the fridge or squashes with ice cubes - Sarah opted for a can and Joe had a blackcurrent squash, while Sarah's aunt made herself a cup of tea. Then she brought out a tin of biscuits from a cupboard and told them to take two or three each. They chose what they wanted - Joe saw with approval that there was quite a range of biscuits, including lots of chocolate ones but he didn't want to appear greedy so he had only two chocolate biscuits and made the third a ginger nut. Sarah's aunt put their biscuits on plates and ushered the children back into the sitting room.

While they sat eating their biscuits and drinking their cold drinks and Sarah's aunt was having a quick look at the books, Joe had a look around the room. There were several photographs on the wall showing Sarah's aunt, without the glasses, and without a great deal of anything else on either. She seemed to be dressed mainly in glitter and feathers. One photograph showed a long line of ladies

similarly dressed, all kicking their legs in the air. Sarah giggled as Joe looked at the photographs and went rather red.

"I see you're admiring my photos," said Sarah's Aunt. "I was a bit younger then. That was when I was a dancer in Paris at the Follies. My stage name was Fifi Mistral. After I gave up my career as a dancer I came back here but I've kept my stage name in my new career. I'm now known as Madame Fifi."

"What do you do now?" asked Joe.

"I'm a medium," said Madame Fifi. "I hold seances and people come and try to get in touch with the Other Side."

Joe felt a bit cold down the back of his neck.

"You mean you can speak to dead people, like ghosts?" he gasped.

"Not exactly, although that's the general idea," replied Madame Fifi; she sighed, "only I'm no good at it and I have hardly any customers. Good job I made enough as a dancer to live on."

"Was it well paid?" asked Sarah. "Perhaps I should become a dancer when I grow up."

"Don't say that to your parents or they'll have a fit - they'll say I'm a bad influence on you," said her Aunt, laughing. "No, dancing isn't particularly well paid. But we all had the opportunity as dancers to meet lots of rich young or not so young men and marry them. Unfortunately I never met one to marry. It's all because of my gift." She sipped her tea.

"What gift, auntie?" asked Sarah.

"My gift as a medium. You see, I would go off into trances and end up speaking to these people on the Other Side. Most off-putting when you are sitting down to dinner with some nice young man and suddenly you go off into a trance and all these strange voices start coming through. Especially considering my spirit guide's problems."

"What's a spirit guide?" asked Joe.

"He's the one you speak to the other side through, the one who's supposed to look after you and act a sort of helper. Only I have to have a boozy Red Indian, Chief Thunder Head. I think he's called that because he must have terrible hangovers. He can't look after himself let alone anyone else. There I would be, in some romantic restaurant or elegant hotel room with some eligible rich bachelor. Things were just getting interesting and I would expect some sort of proposal - hopefully involving marriage - and then whoosh, off I would go into a trance, then this sloshed Red Indian chief would blunder through the wall and fall over the furniture singing rude songs in Red Indian. Sometimes you couldn't see him, just hear him, burping his way around the place or you would get the smell of all this cheap whisky - it's very off-putting, I can tell you. Most of those young men ran away screaming but one didn't. He heard the Chief say that he would answer any question he might have - it was one of the occasions the Chief was sober enough to actually be understandable. This young man had the presence of mind to ask what shares were going to be going up on the stock exchange in the near future. How the Chief knew I don't know but he gave him a few tips and the young man put some money into them. The next thing I knew he was at the stage door, in this huge Rolls Royce, taking me out to dinner again. It was the first time anyone had taken me out twice - most of them were too terrified after the first time. He told me that he had made an absolute fortune and was very grateful. He said that ordinarily he'd marry me but he didn't fancy sharing his life with a Red Indian Chief as well - I could understand that - but to show his gratitude he'd give me a present.

He did too. It was a cheque for rather a lot of money, so I retired from the stage and brought this place and I've got enough left to live on. Good job, because as a medium I don't seem to be up to much. I get Chief Thunder Head coming through all right but he doesn't put me touch with the sort of people that my clients want to speak to. They want to speak to dead Aunt Doris and ask her about her will or say sorry to granny because they never visited her when she was alive. But I can't get through to people like that. I seem to get through top the weirdest bunch outside of an asylum."

Joe wasn't sure that Aunt Fifi shouldn't be in a asylum too, but he was interested enough to ask "What do you mean, a weird bunch? Who do you speak to?"

Aunt Fifi sipped her tea. "Well," she replied, "people like Napoleon's second cousin once removed, or Henry VIII's hatter. I spoke to Attila the Hun's younger brother once - it's never the famous, only the nearly famous or people who knew them or were distantly related to them that I get. The other thing is that they all seem to be fairly useless. I certainly wouldn't ask them for advice. How on earth that nice young man got those tips for buying shares I'll never know - none of the ones I've spoken to could tell you how to unblock a drain, let alone anything else. I did get one man who said he had been a gardener to Queen Elizabeth the First and I asked his advice on a bit of gardening, but he couldn't distinguish tulips from onions. It turned out he had planted up the potatoes Walter Raleigh bought back from America; when they grew, he took the wrong bits to the royal kitchens - not the potatoes from round the roots but all the green leaves from the top. Well, those bits of the potato plant are poisonous - the earl who ate them before the Queen had the chance to have a plateful turns out to have been the first person to find this out. This probably explains how the gardener wound up on the Other Side! They're all like that, characters from history but not famous ones."

"Useful for homework," said Sarah. "I could come round here and you could put me in touch with people from the past who could tell me all about things that happened and what it was like to live in those days. I'd better not tell Dad though."

"No indeed!" laughed Aunt Fifi. "Your father thinks I'm strange enough without giving him reason to think that I'm altogether barmy. But I don't think the bunch I've met so far would be a lot of use to you. What are you doing in history at the moment?"

"The last thing we did was the Romans," said Sarah. "What about you, Joe"

"The same," nodded Joe. "I quite enjoyed them. All those roads and walls and towns."

Sarah agreed. "Yes," she said, "it was interesting."

"Well, I hate to think what Romans I could have put you in touch with," said Aunt Fifi. "Just think, anyway, if you went to school and told the teacher he or she was wrong - you'd met a Roman and he told you what really happened!"

"They would think I was potty!" said Joe.

"Why do you get all these big books, Auntie?" asked Sarah.

"I'm trying to find out more about my gift - or perhaps I should call it a curse," replied Aunt Fifi. "I seem to be able to get through to the other side more often now and have a bit more control over it. I don't find myself going off into trance when I'm out shopping as much as I used to - very embarrassing it is, wondering around Tesco's with a Red Indian shambling behind you and demanding to know the way to the wine section. I'm trying to understand it all and see if I can use it

properly - and find out just what I'm in contact with. I still get surprised sometimes, though, and recently I've been finding myself drifting off into some other plane altogether."

"What happens when you go into a trance?" asked Joe. It did seem odd to be talking matter-of-factly about such things when the sun was shining outside and the garden looked so full of life and colour.

"Well, once I just used to go stiff and close my eyes, and then the Chief would manifest himself - I didn't know much about it but everyone around me did. But then I started being able to control it a bit better - I'd feel a bit woolly-headed and then it was like a door opening and in would come the Chief. I was able to talk to him - when he was able to understand anything. That's when I started to talk to the people he introduced me to. Now something else altogether seems to happen - a white cloud fills the room and the Chief comes through. I've no idea why the cloud has started appearing but it does mean that I can go with him to the Other Side now and again. He's become a lot easier to deal with, too, over the last few months because he's given up the booze, but he's still terribly unreliable."

"Do you know when it's going to happen," asked Joe, not keen on having white clouds just appear out of nowhere with Red Indian chiefs stepping out of them.

"No, not really," replied Aunt Fifi. "That's another reason why I'm not much use as a medium. I can't really control when I go off into trances. People come round here - not very often, as you can imagine - and we can sit here for hours, with me giving them cups of tea and cakes but not a sniff of the Other Side."

She yawned and stretched and put her cup down on the table. Her eyes seemed to close and a whisp of white drifted across the room. Alarmed, Joe looked at Sarah who was still munching her way through a biscuit. The white whisps thickened and Sarah realised what was happening.

"Auntie!" she called, "Auntie, wake up! Oh dear!"

Oh dear indeed. The white whisps now filled the room, thickening to form a dense cloud. Looming through it was a figure, advancing on the children.