

‘You frighten me,’ the Gypsy said. ‘Never have I seen my crystal ball so filled with darkness.’

She cupped her hands around the thing, as if to shield my eyes from the horrors that were swimming in its murky depths. As her fingers gripped the glass, I thought I could feel ice water trickling down inside my gullet.

At the edge of the table, a thin candle flickered, its sickly light glancing off the dangling brass hoops of the Gypsy’s earrings, then flying off to die somewhere in the darkened corners of the tent.

Black hair, black eyes, black dress, red-painted cheeks, red mouth, and a voice that could only have come from smoking half a million cigarettes.

As if to confirm my suspicions, the old woman was suddenly gripped by a fit of violent coughing that rattled her crooked frame and left her gasping horribly for air. It sounded as though a large bird had somehow become entangled in her lungs and was flapping to escape.

‘Are you alright?’ I asked. ‘I’ll go for help.’

I thought I had seen Dr Darby in the churchyard not ten minutes earlier, pausing to have a word or two at each stall of the church fête. But before I could make a move, the Gypsy’s dusky hand had covered mine on the black velvet of the tabletop.

‘No,’ she said. ‘No...don’t do that. It happens all the time.’

And she began to cough again.

I waited it out patiently, almost afraid to move.

‘How old are you?’ she said at last. ‘Ten? Twelve?’

‘Eleven,’ I said, and she nodded her head wearily as though she’d known it all along.

‘I see—a mountain,’ she went on, almost strangling on the words, ‘and the face—of the woman you will become.’

In spite of the stifling heat of the darkened tent, my blood ran cold. She was seeing Harriet, of course!

Harriet was my mother, who had died in a climbing accident when I was a baby.

The Gypsy turned my hand over and dug her thumb painfully into the very centre of my palm. My fingers spread—and then curled in upon themselves like the toes of a severed chicken’s foot.

She took up my left hand.

‘This is the hand you were born with,’ she said, barely glancing at the palm, then letting it fall and picking up the other.

‘...and this is the hand you’ve grown.’

She stared at it distastefully as the candle flickered.

‘This broken star on your Mount of Luna shows a brilliant mind turned in upon itself—a mind that wanders the roads of darkness.’

This was not what I wanted to hear.

‘Tell me about the woman you saw on the mountain,’ I said. ‘The one I shall become.’

She coughed again, clutching her coloured shawl tightly about her shoulders, as though wrapping herself against some ancient and invisible winter wind.

‘Cross my palm with silver,’ she demanded, sticking out a grubby hand.

‘But I gave you a shilling,’ I said. ‘That’s what it says on the board outside.’

‘Messages from the Third Circle cost extra,’ she wheezed. ‘They drain the batteries of my soul.’

I almost laughed out loud. Who did this old hag think she was? But still, she seemed to have spotted Harriet beyond the veil, and I couldn’t let scepticism spoil even half a chance of having a few words with my dead mother.

I dug for my last shilling, and as I pressed the coin into her hand, the Gypsy’s dark eyes, suddenly as bright as a jackdaw’s, met mine.

‘She is trying to come home,’ she said. ‘This ... woman ... is trying to come home from the cold. She wants you to help her.’