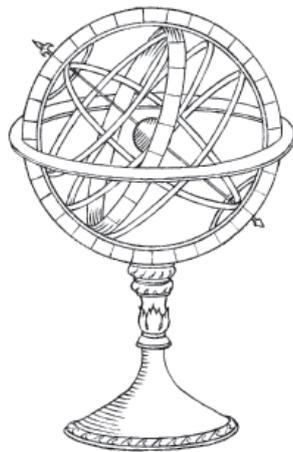


*The
Seven Sisters*

Maia's Story



LUCINDA RILEY

MACMILLAN

Maia

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I will always remember exactly where I was and what I was doing when I heard that my father had died.

I was sitting in the pretty garden of my old schoolfriend's townhouse in London, a copy of *The Penelopiad* open but unread in my lap, enjoying the June sun while Jenny collected her little boy from nursery.

I felt calm and appreciated what a good idea it had been to get away. I was studying the burgeoning clematis, encouraged by its sunny midwife to give birth to a riot of colour, when my mobile phone rang. I glanced at the screen and saw it was Marina.

'Hello, Ma, how are you?' I said, hoping she could hear the warmth in my voice too.

'Maia, I . . .'

Marina paused, and in that instant I knew something was dreadfully wrong. 'What is it?'

'Maia, there's no easy way to tell you this, but your father had a heart attack here at home yesterday afternoon, and in the early hours of this morning, he . . . passed away.'

I remained silent, as a million different and ridiculous thoughts raced through my mind. The first one being that

LUCINDA RILEY

Marina, for some unknown reason, had decided to play some form of tasteless joke on me.

‘You’re the first of the sisters I’ve told, Maia, as you’re the eldest. And I wanted to ask you whether you would prefer to tell the rest of your sisters yourself, or leave it to me.’

‘I . . .’

Still no words would form coherently on my lips, as I began to realise that Marina, dear, beloved Marina, the woman who had been the closest thing to a mother I’d ever known, would never tell me this if it *wasn’t* true. So it had to be. And at that moment, my entire world shifted on its axis.

‘Maia, please, tell me you’re all right. This really is the most dreadful call I’ve ever had to make, but what else could I do? God only knows how the other girls are going to take it.’

It was then that I heard the suffering in *her* voice and understood she’d needed to tell me as much for her own sake as mine. So I switched into my normal comfort zone, which was to comfort others.

‘Of course I’ll tell my sisters if you’d prefer, Ma, although I’m not positive where they all are. Isn’t Ally away training for a regatta?’

And as we continued to discuss where each of my younger sisters was, as though we needed to get them together for a birthday party rather than to mourn the death of our father, the entire conversation took on a sense of the surreal.

‘When should we plan on having the funeral, do you think? What with Electra being in Los Angeles and Ally somewhere on the high seas, surely we can’t think about it until next week at the earliest?’ I said.

‘Well . . .’ I heard the hesitation in Marina’s voice. ‘Perhaps

The Seven Sisters

the best thing is for you and I to discuss it when you arrive back home. There really is no rush now, Maia, so if you'd prefer to continue the last couple of days of your holiday in London, that would be fine. There's nothing more to be done for him here . . .' Her voice trailed off miserably.

'Ma, of *course* I'll be on the next flight to Geneva I can get! I'll call the airline immediately, and then I'll do my best to get in touch with everyone.'

'I'm so terribly sorry, *chérie*,' Marina said sadly. 'I know how you adored him.'

'Yes,' I said, the strange calm that I had felt while we discussed arrangements suddenly deserting me like the stillness before a violent thunderstorm. 'I'll call you later, when I know what time I'll be arriving.'

'Please take care of yourself, Maia. You've had a terrible shock.'

I pressed the button to end the call, and before the storm clouds in my heart opened up and drowned me, I went upstairs to my bedroom to retrieve my flight documents and contact the airline. As I waited in the calling queue, I glanced at the bed where I'd woken up this morning to *Simply Another Day*. And I thanked God that human beings don't have the power to see into the future.

The officious woman who eventually answered wasn't helpful and I knew, as she spoke of full flights, financial penalties and credit card details, that my emotional dam was ready to burst. Finally, once I'd grudgingly been granted a seat on the four o'clock flight to Geneva, which would mean throwing everything into my holdall immediately and taking a taxi to Heathrow, I sat down on the bed and stared for so long at

LUCINDA RILEY

the sprigged wallpaper that the pattern began to dance in front of my eyes.

‘He’s gone,’ I whispered, ‘gone forever. I’ll never see him again.’

Expecting the spoken words to provoke a raging torrent of tears, I was surprised that nothing actually happened. Instead, I sat there numbly, my head still full of practicalities. The thought of telling my sisters – all five of them – was horrendous, and I searched through my emotional filing system for the one I would call first. Inevitably, it was Tiggy, the second youngest of the six of us girls and the sibling to whom I’d always felt closest.

With trembling fingers, I scrolled down to find her number and dialled it. When her voicemail answered, I didn’t know what to say, other than a few garbled words asking her to call me back urgently. She was currently somewhere in the Scottish Highlands working at a centre for orphaned and sick wild deer.

As for the other sisters . . . I knew their reactions would vary, outwardly at least, from indifference to a dramatic outpouring of emotion.

Given that I wasn’t currently sure quite which way *I* would go on the scale of grief when I did speak to any of them, I decided to take the coward’s way out and texted them all, asking them to call me as soon as they could. Then I hurriedly packed my holdall and walked down the narrow stairs to the kitchen to write a note for Jenny explaining why I’d had to leave in such a hurry.

Deciding to take my chances hailing a black cab on the London streets, I left the house, walking briskly around the leafy Chelsea crescent just as any normal person would do on

The Seven Sisters

any normal day. I believe I actually said hello to someone walking a dog when I passed him in the street and managed a smile.

No one would know what had just happened to me, I thought, as I managed to find a taxi on the busy King's Road and climbed inside, directing the driver to Heathrow.

No one would know.



Five hours later, just as the sun was making its leisurely descent over Lake Geneva, I arrived at our private pontoon on the shore, from where I would make the last leg of my journey home.

Christian was already waiting for me in our sleek Riva motor launch. And from the look on his face, I could see he'd heard the news.

'How are you, Mademoiselle Maia?' he asked, sympathy in his blue eyes as he helped me aboard.

'I'm . . . glad I'm here,' I answered neutrally as I walked to the back of the boat and sat down on the cushioned cream leather bench that curved around the stern. Usually, I would sit with Christian in the passenger seat at the front as we sped across the calm waters on the twenty-minute journey home. But today, I felt a need for privacy. As Christian started the powerful engine, the sun glinted off the windows of the fabulous houses that lined Lake Geneva's shores. I'd often felt when I made this journey that it was the entrance to an ethereal world disconnected from reality.

The world of Pa Salt.

I noticed the first vague evidence of tears pricking at my

LUCINDA RILEY

eyes as I thought of my father's pet name, which I'd coined when I was young. He'd always loved sailing and often when he returned to me at our lakeside home, he had smelt of fresh air and of the sea. Somehow, the name had stuck, and as my younger siblings had joined me, they'd called him that too.

As the launch picked up speed, the warm wind streaming through my hair, I thought of the hundreds of previous journeys I'd made to Atlantis, Pa Salt's fairy-tale castle. Inaccessible by land, due to its position on a private promontory with a crescent of mountainous terrain rising up steeply behind it, the only method of reaching it was by boat. The nearest neighbours were miles away along the lake, so Atlantis was our own private kingdom, set apart from the rest of the world. Everything it contained was magical . . . as if Pa Salt and we – his daughters – had lived there under an enchantment.

Each one of us had been chosen by Pa Salt as a baby, adopted from the four corners of the globe and brought home to live under his protection. And each one of us, as Pa always liked to say, was special, different . . . we were *his* girls. He'd named us all after The Seven Sisters, his favourite star cluster. Maia being the first and eldest.

When I was young, he'd take me up to his glass-domed observatory perched on top of the house, lift me up with his big, strong hands and have me look through his telescope at the night sky.

'There it is,' he'd say as he aligned the lens. 'Look, Maia, that's the beautiful shining star you're named after.'

And I *would* see. As he explained the legends that were the source of my own and my sisters' names, I'd hardly listen,

The Seven Sisters

but simply enjoy his arms tight around me, fully aware of this rare, special moment when I had him all to myself.

I'd realised eventually that Marina, who I'd presumed as I grew up was my mother – I'd even shortened her name to 'Ma' – was a glorified nursemaid, employed by Pa to take care of me because he was away such a lot. But of course, Marina was so much more than that to all of us girls. She was the one who had wiped our tears, berated us for sloppy table manners and steered us calmly through the difficult transition from childhood to womanhood.

She had always been there, and I could not have loved Ma any more if she had given birth to me.

During the first three years of my childhood, Marina and I had lived alone together in our magical castle on the shores of Lake Geneva as Pa Salt travelled the seven seas to conduct his business. And then, one by one, my sisters began to arrive.

Usually, Pa would bring me a present when he returned home. I'd hear the motor launch arriving, run across the sweeping lawns and through the trees to the jetty to greet him. Like any child, I'd want to see what he had hidden inside his magical pockets to delight me. On one particular occasion, however, after he'd presented me with an exquisitely carved wooden reindeer, which he assured me came from St Nicholas's workshop at the North Pole itself, a uniformed woman had stepped out from behind him, and in her arms was a bundle wrapped in a shawl. And the bundle was moving.

'This time, Maia, I've brought you back the most special gift. You have a new sister.' He'd smiled at me as he lifted me into his arms. 'Now you'll no longer be lonely when I have to go away.'

LUCINDA RILEY

After that, life had changed. The maternity nurse that Pa had brought with him disappeared after a few weeks and Marina took over the care of my baby sister. I couldn't understand how the red, squalling thing which often smelt and diverted attention from me could possibly be a gift. Until one morning, when Alcyone – named after the second star of The Seven Sisters – smiled at me from her high chair over breakfast.

'She knows who I am,' I said in wonder to Marina, who was feeding her.

'Of course she does, Maia, dear. You're her big sister, the one she'll look up to. It'll be up to you to teach her lots of things that you know and she doesn't.'

And as she grew, she became my shadow, following me everywhere, which pleased and irritated me in equal measure.

'Maia, wait me!' she'd demand loudly as she tottered along behind me.

Even though Ally – as I'd nicknamed her – had originally been an unwanted addition to my dreamlike existence at Atlantis, I could not have asked for a sweeter, more loveable companion. She rarely, if ever, cried and there were none of the temper-tantrums associated with toddlers of her age. With her tumbling red-gold curls and her big blue eyes, Ally had a natural charm that drew people to her, including our father. On the occasions Pa Salt was home from one of his long trips abroad, I'd watch how his eyes lit up when he saw her, in a way I was sure they didn't for me. And whereas I was shy and reticent with strangers, Ally had an openness and a readiness to trust that endeared her to everyone.

She was also one of those children who seemed to excel at everything – particularly music, and any sport to do with

The Seven Sisters

water. I remember Pa teaching her to swim in our vast pool and, whereas I had struggled to stay afloat and hated being underwater, my little sister took to it like a mermaid. And while I couldn't find my sea legs even on the *Titan*, Pa's huge and beautiful ocean-going yacht, when we were at home Ally would beg him to take her out in the small Laser he kept moored on our private lakeside jetty. I'd crouch in the cramped stern of the boat while Pa and Ally took control as we sped across the glassy waters. Their joint passion for sailing bonded them in a way I felt I could never replicate.

Although Ally had studied music at the Conservatoire de Musique de Genève and was a highly talented flautist who could have pursued a career with a professional orchestra, since leaving music school she had chosen the life of a full-time sailor. She now competed regularly in regattas, and had represented Switzerland on a number of occasions.

When Ally was almost three, Pa arrived home with our next sibling, whom he named Asterope, after the third of The Seven Sisters.

'But we will call her Star,' Pa had said, smiling at Marina, Ally and me as we studied the newest addition to the family lying in the bassinet.

By now I was attending lessons every morning with a private tutor, so my newest sister's arrival affected me less than Ally's had. Then, only six months later, another baby joined us, a twelve-week-old girl named Celaeno, whose name Ally immediately shortened to CeCe.

There was only three months' age difference between Star and CeCe, and from as far back as I can remember, the two of them forged a close bond. They were akin to twins, talking in their own private baby language, some of which the two of

LUCINDA RILEY

them still used to communicate to this day. They inhabited their own private world, to the exclusion of us other sisters. And even now in their twenties, nothing had changed. CeCe, the younger of the two, was always the boss, her stocky body and nut-brown skin in direct contrast to the pale, whippet-thin Star.

The following year, another baby arrived – Taygete, whom I nicknamed ‘Tiggy’ because her short dark hair sprouted out at strange angles on her tiny head and reminded me of the hedgehog in Beatrix Potter’s famous story.

I was by now seven years old, and I’d bonded with Tiggy from the first moment I set eyes on her. She was the most delicate of us all, suffering one childhood illness after another, but even as an infant, she was stoic and undemanding. When yet another baby girl, named Electra, was brought home by Pa a few months later, an exhausted Marina would often ask me if I would mind sitting with Tiggy, who continually had a fever or croup. Eventually diagnosed as asthmatic, she rarely left the nursery to be wheeled outside in the pram, in case the cold air and heavy fog of a Geneva winter affected her chest.

Electra was the youngest of my siblings and her name suited her perfectly. By now, I was used to little babies and their demands, but my youngest sister was without doubt the most challenging of them all. Everything about her *was* electric; her innate ability to switch in an instant from dark to light and vice versa meant that our previously calm home rang daily with high-pitched screams. Her temper-tantrums resonated through my childhood consciousness and as she grew older, her fiery personality did not mellow.

Privately, Ally, Tiggy and I had our own nickname for her; she was known among the three of us as ‘Tricky’. We all

The Seven Sisters

walked on eggshells around her, wishing to do nothing to set off a lightning change of mood. I can honestly say there were moments when I loathed her for the disruption she brought to Atlantis.

And yet, when Electra knew one of us was in trouble, she was the first to offer help and support. Just as she was capable of huge selfishness, her generosity on other occasions was equally pronounced.

After Electra, the entire household was expecting the arrival of the Seventh Sister. After all, we'd been named after Pa Salt's favourite star cluster and we wouldn't be complete without her. We even knew her name – Merope – and wondered who she would be. But a year went past, and then another, and another, and no more babies arrived home with our father.

I remember vividly standing with him once in his observatory. I was fourteen years old and just on the brink of womanhood. We were waiting for an eclipse, which he'd told me was a seminal moment for humankind and usually brought change with it.

'Pa,' I said, 'will you ever bring home our seventh sister?'

At this, his strong, protective bulk had seemed to freeze for a few seconds. He'd looked suddenly as though he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. Although he didn't turn around, for he was still concentrating on training the telescope on the coming eclipse, I knew instinctively that what I'd said had distressed him.

'No, Maia, I won't. Because I have never found her.'



LUCINDA RILEY

As the familiar thick hedge of spruce trees, which shielded our waterside home from prying eyes, came into view, I saw Marina standing on the jetty and the dreadful truth of losing Pa finally began to sink in.

And I realised that the man who had created the kingdom in which we had all been his princesses was no longer present to hold the enchantment in place.

2

Marina put her comforting arms gently around my shoulders as I stepped up onto the jetty from the launch. Wordlessly, we turned to walk together through the trees and across the wide, sloping lawns that led up to the house. In June, our home was at the height of its beauty. The ornate gardens were bursting into bloom, enticing their occupants to explore the hidden pathways and secret grottos.

The house itself, built in the late eighteenth century in the Louis XV style, was a vision of elegant grandeur. Four storeys high, its sturdy pale pink walls were punctuated by tall multi-paned windows, and topped by a steeply sloping red roof with turrets at each corner. Exquisitely furnished inside with every modern luxury, its thick carpets and plump sofas cocooned and comforted all who lived there. We girls had slept up on the top floor, which had superb, uninterrupted views of the lake over the treetops. Marina also occupied a suite of rooms upstairs with us.

I glanced at her now and thought how exhausted she looked. Her kind brown eyes were smudged with shadows of fatigue, and her normally smiling mouth looked pinched and tense. I supposed she must be in her mid-sixties, but she didn't

LUCINDA RILEY

seem it. Tall, with strong aquiline features, she was an elegant, handsome woman, always immaculately attired, her effortless chic reflecting her French ancestry. When I was young, she used to wear her silky dark hair loose, but now she coiled it into a chignon at the nape of her neck.

A thousand questions were pushing for precedence in my mind, but only one demanded to be asked immediately.

‘Why didn’t you let me know as soon as Pa had the heart attack?’ I asked as we entered the house and walked into the high-ceilinged drawing room that overlooked a sweeping stone terrace, lined with urns full of vivid red and gold nasturtiums.

‘Maia, believe me, I begged him to let me tell you, to tell all you girls, but he became so distressed when I mentioned it that I had to do as he wished.’

And I understood that if Pa had told her not to contact us, she could have done little else. He was the king and Marina was at best his most trusted courtier, at worst his servant who must do exactly as he bade her.

‘Where is he now?’ I asked her. ‘Still upstairs in his bedroom? Should I go and see him?’

‘No, *chérie*, he isn’t upstairs. Would you like some tea before I tell you more?’ she asked.

‘To be quite honest, I think I could do with a strong gin and tonic,’ I admitted as I sat down heavily on one of the huge sofas.

‘I’ll ask Claudia to make it. And I think that, on this occasion, I may join you myself.’

I watched as Marina left the room to find Claudia, our housekeeper, who had been at Atlantis as long as Marina. She was German, her outward dourness hiding a heart of

The Seven Sisters

gold. Like all of us, she'd adored her master. I wondered suddenly what would become of her and Marina. And, in fact, what would happen to Atlantis itself now that Pa had gone.

The words still seemed incongruous in this context. Pa was always 'gone' – off somewhere, doing something, although none of his staff or family had any specific idea of what he actually did to make his living. I'd asked him once, when my friend Jenny had come to stay with us during the school holidays and been noticeably awed by the opulence of the way we lived.

'Your father must be fabulously wealthy,' she'd whispered as we stepped off Pa's private jet which had just landed at La Môle airport near St Tropez. The chauffeur was waiting on the tarmac to take us down to the harbour, where we'd board our magnificent ten-berth yacht, the *Titan*, and sail off for our annual Mediterranean cruise to whichever destination Pa Salt fancied taking us.

Like any child, rich or poor, given that I had grown up knowing no different, the way we lived had never really struck me as unusual. All of us girls had taken lessons with tutors at home when we were younger, and it was only when I went to boarding school at the age of thirteen that I began to realise how removed our life was from most other people's.

When I asked Pa once what exactly it was he did to provide our family with every luxury imaginable, he looked at me in that secretive way he had and smiled. 'I am a magician of sorts.'

Which, as he'd intended, told me nothing.

As I grew older, I began to realise that Pa Salt was the master illusionist and nothing was as it first seemed.

When Marina came back into the drawing room carrying

LUCINDA RILEY

two gin and tonics on a tray, it occurred to me that, after thirty-three years, I had no real idea who my father had been in the world outside Atlantis. And I wondered whether I would finally begin to find out now.

‘There we go,’ Marina said, setting the glass in front of me. ‘Here’s to your father,’ she said as she raised hers. ‘May God rest his soul.’

‘Yes, here’s to Pa Salt. May he rest in peace.’

Marina took a hefty gulp before replacing the glass on the table and taking my hands in hers. ‘Maia, before we discuss anything else, I feel I must tell you one thing.’

‘What?’ I asked, looking at her weary brow, furrowed with anxiety.

‘You asked me earlier if your father was still here in the house. The answer is that he has already been laid to rest. It was his wish that the burial happen immediately and that none of you girls be present.’

I stared at her as if she’d taken leave of her senses. ‘But Ma, you told me only a few hours ago that he died in the early hours of this morning! How is it possible that a burial could have been arranged so soon? And *why*?’

‘Maia, your father was adamant that as soon as he passed away, his body was to be flown on his jet to his yacht. Once on board, he was to be placed in a lead coffin, which had apparently sat in the hold of the *Titan* for many years in preparation for such an event. From there he was to be sailed out to sea. Naturally, given his love for the water, he wanted to be laid to rest in the ocean. And he did not wish to cause his daughters the distress of . . . watching the event.’

‘Oh God,’ I said, Marina’s words sending shudders of horror through me. ‘But surely he knew that we’d all want to

The Seven Sisters

say goodbye properly? How could he do this? What will I tell the others? I . . .’

‘*Chérie*, you and I have lived in this house the longest and we both know that where your father was concerned, ours was never to question why. I can only believe,’ she said quietly, ‘that he wished to be laid to rest as he lived: privately.’

‘And in control,’ I added, anger flaring suddenly inside me. ‘It’s almost as though he couldn’t even trust the people who loved him to do the right thing for him.’

‘Whatever his reasoning,’ said Marina, ‘I only hope that in time you can all remember him as the loving father he was. The one thing I do know is that you girls were his world.’

‘But which of us knew him?’ I asked, frustration bringing tears to my eyes. ‘Did a doctor come to confirm his death? You must have a death certificate? Can I see it?’

‘The doctor asked me for his personal details, such as his place and year of birth. I said I was only an employee and I wasn’t sure of those kinds of things. I put him in touch with Georg Hoffman, the lawyer who handles all your father’s affairs.’

‘But *why* was he so private, Ma? I was thinking today on the plane that I don’t ever remember him bringing friends here to Atlantis. Occasionally, when we were on the yacht, a business associate would come aboard for a meeting and they’d disappear downstairs into his study, but he never actually socialised.’

‘He wanted to keep his family life separate from business, so that when he was at home his full attention could be on his daughters.’

‘The daughters he adopted and brought here from all over the world. Why, Ma, why?’

LUCINDA RILEY

Marina looked back at me silently, her wise, calm eyes giving me no clues as to whether or not she knew the answer.

‘I mean, when you’re a child,’ I continued, ‘you grow up accepting your life. But we both know it’s terribly unusual – if not downright strange – for a single, middle-aged man to adopt six baby girls and bring them here to Switzerland to grow up under the same roof.’

‘Your father *was* an unusual man,’ Marina agreed. ‘But surely, giving needy orphans the chance of a better life under his protection couldn’t be seen as a bad thing?’ she equivocated. ‘Many wealthy people adopt children if they have none of their own.’

‘But usually, they’re married,’ I said bluntly. ‘Ma, do you know if Pa ever had a girlfriend? Someone he loved? I knew him for thirty-three years and never once did I see him with a woman.’

‘*Chérie*, I understand that your father has gone, and suddenly you realise that many questions you’ve wanted to ask him can now never be answered, but I really can’t help you. And besides, this isn’t the moment,’ Marina added gently. ‘For now, we must celebrate what he was to each and every one of us and remember him as the kind and loving human being we all knew within the walls of Atlantis. Try to remember that your father was well over eighty. He’d lived a long and fulfilling life.’

‘But he was out sailing the Laser on the lake only three weeks ago, scrambling around the boat like a man half his age,’ I said, remembering. ‘It’s hard to reconcile that image with someone who was dying.’

‘Yes, and thank God he didn’t follow many others of his age and suffer a slow and lingering death. It’s wonderful that

The Seven Sisters

you and the other girls will remember him as fit, happy and healthy,' Marina encouraged. 'It was certainly what he would have wanted.'

'He didn't suffer at the end, did he?' I asked her tentatively, knowing in my heart that even if he had, Marina would never tell me.

'No. He knew what was coming, Maia, and I believe that he'd made his peace with God. Really, I think he was happy to pass on.'

'How on earth do I tell the others that their father has gone?' I entreated her. 'And that they don't even have a body to bury? They'll feel like I do, that he's simply disappeared into thin air.'

'Your father thought of that before he died, and Georg Hoffman, his lawyer, contacted me earlier today. I promise you that each and every one of you will get a chance to say goodbye to him.'

'Even in death, Pa has everything under control,' I said with a despairing sigh. 'I've left messages for all my sisters, by the way, but as yet, no one has called me back.'

'Well, Georg Hoffman is on standby to come here as soon as you've all arrived. And please, Maia, don't ask me what he'll have to say, for I haven't a clue. Now, I had Claudia prepare some soup for you. I doubt you've eaten anything since this morning. Would you prefer to take it to the Pavilion, or do you want to stay here in the house tonight?'

'I'll have some soup here, and then I'll go home if you don't mind. I think I need to be alone.'

'Of course.' Marina reached towards me and gave me a hug. 'I understand what a terrible shock this is for you. And I'm sorry that yet again you're bearing the burden of

LUCINDA RILEY

responsibility for the rest of the girls, but it was you he asked me to tell first. I don't know whether you find any comfort in that. Now, shall I go and ask Claudia to warm the soup? I think we could both do with a little comfort food.'

After we'd eaten, I told Marina to go to bed and kissed her goodnight, for I could see that she too was exhausted. Before I left the house, I climbed the many stairs to the top floor and peered into each of my sisters' rooms. All remained as they had been when their occupants left home to take flight on their chosen paths, and each room still displayed their very different personalities. Whenever they returned, like doves to their waterside nest, none of them seemed to have the vaguest interest in changing them. Including me.

Opening the door to my old room, I went to the shelf where I still kept my most treasured childhood possessions. I took down an old china doll which Pa had given to me when I was very young. As always, he'd woven a magical story of how the doll had once belonged to a young Russian countess, but she had been lonely in her snowy palace in Moscow when her mistress had grown up and forgotten her. He told me her name was Leonora and that she needed a new pair of arms to love her.

Putting the doll back on the shelf, I reached for the box that contained a gift Pa had given me on my sixteenth birthday; I opened it and drew out the necklace inside.

'It's a moonstone, Maia,' he'd told me as I'd stared at the unusual opalescent stone, which shone with a blueish hue and was encircled with tiny diamonds. 'It's older than I am, and comes with a very interesting story.' I remembered he'd hesitated then, as if he was weighing something up in his mind. 'Maybe one day I'll tell you what it is,' he'd continued. 'The

The Seven Sisters

necklace is probably a little grown up for you now. But one day, I think it will suit you very well.'

Pa had been right in his assessment. At the time, my body was festooned – like all my schoolfriends' – with cheap silver bangles and large crosses hanging from leather strings around my neck. I'd never worn the moonstone and it had sat here, forgotten on the shelf, ever since.

But I would wear it now.

Going to the mirror, I fastened the tiny clasp of the delicate gold chain around my neck and studied it. Perhaps it was my imagination, but the stone seemed to glow luminously against my skin. My fingers went instinctively to touch it as I walked to the window and looked out over the twinkling lights of Lake Geneva.

'Rest in peace, darling Pa Salt,' I whispered.

And before further memories began to engulf me, I walked swiftly away from my childhood room, out of the house and along the narrow path that took me to my current adult home, some two hundred metres away.

The front door to the Pavilion was left permanently unlocked; given the high-tech security which operated on the perimeter of our land, there was little chance of someone stealing away with my few possessions.

Walking inside, I saw that Claudia had already been in to switch on the lamps in my sitting room. I sat down heavily on the sofa, despair engulfing me.

I was the sister who had never left.

3

When my mobile rang at two in the morning, I was lying sleepless on my bed, pondering why I seemed unable to let go and cry over Pa's death. My stomach performed an abrupt one hundred and eighty degree turn as I saw on the screen it was Tiggy.

'Hello?'

'Maia, I'm sorry to call so late, but I only just picked up your message. We have a very patchy signal up here. I could tell from your voice something was wrong. Are you okay?'

The sound of Tiggy's sweet, light voice thawed the edges of the frozen rock that currently seemed to have taken the place of my heart.

'Yes, I'm okay, but . . .'

'Is it Pa Salt?'

'Yes,' I gulped, breathless from tension. 'How did you know?'

'I didn't . . . I mean I don't . . . but I had the strangest feeling this morning when I was out on the moors searching for one of the young does we'd tagged a few weeks back. I found her dead, and then for some reason, I thought of Pa. I brushed

The Seven Sisters

the feeling off, thinking that I was just upset over the doe. Is he . . . ?’

‘Tiggy, I’m so, so sorry, but . . . I have to tell you that he died earlier today. Or should I say, yesterday now,’ I corrected myself.

‘Oh Maia, no! I can’t believe it. What happened? Was it a sailing accident? I told him only last time I saw him that he shouldn’t be skippering the Laser alone any longer.’

‘No, he died here at the house. It was a heart attack.’

‘Were you with him? Did he suffer? I . . .’ There was a catch in Tiggy’s voice. ‘I couldn’t bear to think of him suffering.’

‘No, Tiggy, I wasn’t here. I’d gone to visit my friend Jenny in London for a few days. In fact’ – I drew in my breath as I remembered – ‘it was Pa who persuaded me to go. He said it would do me good to get away from Atlantis and have a break.’

‘Oh Maia, how awful for you. I mean, you leave so rarely, and the one time you do . . .’

‘I know.’

‘You don’t think he knew, do you? And wanted to spare you?’

Tiggy voiced the same thought that had flitted across my mind in the past few hours.

‘No, I don’t. I think it’s called Sod’s Law. Anyway, don’t worry about me. I’m far more concerned about you and the dreadful news I’ve just had to tell you. Are you okay? I wish I was there with you to give you a hug.’

‘To be honest, I can’t tell you how I feel just now, because it’s simply not real. And perhaps it won’t be until I’m home.’

LUCINDA RILEY

I'll try to get on a flight tomorrow. Have you told the others yet?'

'I've left them endless messages asking them to call me urgently.'

'I'll be back as soon as I can to help you, darling Maia. I'm sure there'll be a lot to do with a funeral to arrange.'

I couldn't bring myself to share the news that our father was already buried. 'It'll be good to have you here. Now try to sleep, Tiggy, if you possibly can, and if you need to talk at any time, I'm here.'

'Thank you.' The wobble in Tiggy's voice told me she was on the verge of tears as the news began to sink in. 'Maia, you know he hasn't gone. No spirit dies, they just move on to another plane.'

'I hope that's true. Goodnight, darling Tiggy.'

'Keep strong, Maia, and I'll see you tomorrow.'

As I pressed the button to end the call, I lay back exhausted on the bed, wishing that I shared Tiggy's fervent spiritual beliefs about the afterlife. But just now, I could not think of a single karmic reason why Pa Salt had left the earth.

Perhaps once upon a time, I *had* believed that there was a God, or at least some power beyond human understanding. But somewhere along the line, that comfort had been wiped away.

And if I was honest with myself, I knew exactly when that had happened.

If only I could learn to *feel* again, rather than simply being an automaton who was outwardly a calm, functioning human being. The fact that I didn't seem to be able to react to Pa's death with the kind of emotion it deserved told me more than anything about how deep my problem went.

The Seven Sisters

And yet, I mused, I had no problem comforting others. I knew all my sisters saw me as the family touchstone, the one who would be there for them if there were a problem. Maia; always practical, sensible, and, as Marina had said, supposedly the ‘strong’ one.

The real truth was that I was filled with more fear than any of them. Whereas all my sisters had taken wing and flown the nest, I had remained, hiding behind the need for my presence here now that Pa was getting older. And using the added excuse that it suited perfectly the career I had chosen, which was a solitary one.

Ironically, given the emptiness of my own personal life, I spent my days in a fictional and often romantic world, translating novels from Russian and Portuguese into French, my first language.

It had been Pa who had first noticed my gift, how I could imitate parrot-fashion any language that he cared to speak to me in. As an expert linguist himself, he enjoyed switching from one to the other and seeing if I could do the same in reply. By the time I was twelve, I was tri-lingual in French, German and English – all languages spoken in Switzerland – and was already proficient in Italian, Latin, Greek, Russian and Portuguese.

Languages were a real passion for me, a challenge that was endless, because however good I became, I could always be better. Words and the correct use of them absorbed me, so when it came to thinking about what I might study at university, the choice was an obvious one.

I turned to Pa for advice on which languages I should focus on.

He’d looked at me thoughtfully. ‘Well, Maia, it’s for you

LUCINDA RILEY

to choose, but perhaps it shouldn't be the one you're currently most in command of at present, as you'll have three or four years at university to learn and perfect it.'

'I really don't know, Pa,' I'd sighed. 'I love them all. That's why I'm asking you.'

'Well then, I'll give you a logical view, and tell you that in the next thirty years, the world's economic power is going to radically shift. So if I were you, seeing how you're already fluent in three major western languages, I'd look further afield.'

'You mean countries like China and Russia?' I'd queried.

'Yes, and India and Brazil, of course. All countries that have vast untapped resources, and fascinating cultures too.'

'I've certainly enjoyed Russian, and, in fact, Portuguese. It's a very' – I remember searching for the words – 'expressive language.'

'Well then, there you are.' Pa smiled and I could see he was pleased with my answer. 'Why don't you study both languages? With your natural gift as a linguist, you could easily cope. And I promise you, Maia, that with either or both of those under your belt, the world will be your oyster. There are few people presently who have the vision to see what's coming. The world is changing, and you'll be at the vanguard of it.'



My throat felt parched and dry, and I rolled off the bed and padded into the kitchen to pour myself a glass of water. I thought about how Pa had hoped that I, armed with my unique skills, would step out confidently into the new dawn he was sure was coming. And back then, I'd thought that was

The Seven Sisters

almost certainly what I would do too. Apart from anything else, I'd been desperate to make him proud of me.

But as with so many people, life had happened to me and sent me spinning off my planned trajectory. And instead of providing a launch pad into the wider world, my skill-set had enabled me to hide away in my childhood home.

Whenever my sisters fluttered in from their varying existences across the world, they would tease me about my reclusive life. They told me I was in danger of ending up an old maid, for how was I ever to meet someone if I refused to set foot outside Atlantis?

'You're so beautiful, Maia. Everyone who meets you says the same, and yet you sit here alone and waste it,' Ally had chided me the last time I'd seen her.

And it was probably true that it was my outer packaging that made me stand out in a crowd. Coming from a family of six sisters, we'd all been given our labels when we were younger, the key features that made us special:

Maia, the beauty; Ally, the leader; Star, the peacemaker; CeCe, the pragmatist; Tiggy, the nurturer; and Electra, the fireball.

The question was this: had the gifts we'd each been given brought us success and happiness?

Some of my sisters were still very young and hadn't lived enough of their lives for them to know, or for me to judge. But for myself, I knew that my 'gift' of beauty had helped to bring about the most painful moment of my life, simply because I was too naive at the time to understand the power it wielded. So now, I hid it away, which meant hiding myself.

When Pa had been to visit me in the Pavilion lately, he'd often asked me if I was happy.

LUCINDA RILEY

‘Of course, Pa.’ I’d always answered in the affirmative. After all, outwardly I had little reason *not* to be. I lived in total comfort, with two pairs of loving arms only a stone’s throw away. And the world, technically, *was* my oyster. I had no ties, no responsibilities . . . yet how I longed for them.

I smiled as I thought of Pa, only a couple of weeks ago, encouraging me to visit my old schoolfriend in London. And because it was Pa who suggested it, and I’d spent my adult life feeling that I’d disappointed him, I agreed. Even if I couldn’t be ‘normal’, I hoped he’d think I was if I went.

And so I’d gone to London . . . and returned to find that he had gone too. Forever.

By now it was four in the morning. I returned to my bedroom and lay down, desperate to drift into sleep. But it wouldn’t come. My heart began to beat against my chest as I realised that with Pa’s passing, I could no longer use him as an excuse to hide here. It might even be that Atlantis would be sold. Pa had certainly never mentioned anything to me about what would happen after his death. And as far as I knew, he’d said nothing to any of my sisters either.

Until a few hours ago, Pa Salt had been omnipotent, omnipresent. A force of nature that had held us all securely aloft.

Pa used to call us his golden apples. Ripe and perfectly rounded, just waiting to be plucked. And now the bough had been shaken, and all of us had been sent tumbling to the ground, with no steady hand to catch us as we fell.



The Seven Sisters

I heard someone knocking at my front door and stumbled groggily from the bed to answer it. In desperation a few hours earlier, as dawn was breaking, I'd searched for the sleeping pills I'd been prescribed years ago and taken one. As I glanced at the clock in the hall and saw it was past eleven, I wished that I hadn't succumbed.

As I opened the door, Marina's concerned face appeared from behind it. 'Good morning, Maia. I tried your landline and mobile and there was no answer, so I came to check that you're all right.'

'Sorry, I took a pill and it knocked me out. Come in,' I said, embarrassed.

'No, I'll let you wake up properly, then perhaps when you've taken a shower and got dressed, you could come over to the house? Tiggy called to let me know she's arriving at around five tonight. She managed to get in touch with Star, CeCe and Electra, so they're on their way home too. Any news from Ally?'

'I'll check my mobile and if not, I'll call her again.'

'Are you all right? You don't look well at all, Maia.'

'I'll be fine, Ma, really. I'll be over later.'

I closed the front door, and scuttled into the bathroom to throw some cold water on my face to jog me awake. As I looked in the mirror, I could see why Marina had asked if I was all right. Lines had appeared overnight around my eyes and there were huge blueish marks underneath them. My normally shiny, dark brown hair hung lank and greasy around my face. And my skin, usually an unblemished honey-brown that needed little make-up, looked puffy and pale.

'Hardly the beauty of the family this morning,' I muttered to my reflection, before searching in the tangled bedclothes

LUCINDA RILEY

for my mobile. Eventually finding it under the duvet, I saw there had been eight missed calls. I listened to my sisters' voices, with their varying messages of disbelief and shock. The only sister who had still not responded to my SOS was Ally. Yet again I spoke to her voicemail and asked her to call me urgently.

Up at the house, I found both Marina and Claudia changing sheets and airing my sisters' rooms on the top floor. I could see that Marina, despite her grief, was happy about her flock of girls returning to the roost. It was a rare occurrence these days for us all to be together under one roof. The last time had been in July, eleven months earlier, on Pa's yacht, cruising round the Greek islands. At Christmas, only four of us were here at home, as Star and CeCe had been travelling in the Far East.

'I've sent Christian off on the boat to collect the food and supplies I've ordered,' said Marina as I followed her downstairs. 'Your sisters are all so fussy these days, what with Tiggy being a vegan, and goodness knows which faddy diet Electra is on,' she grumbled, part of her enjoying every second of the sudden chaos, which reminded her, I knew, of the days when we'd all been in her care. 'Claudia's been up since dawn in the kitchen but I thought we'd keep it simple tonight and have pasta and salad.'

'Do you know what time Electra's arriving?' I asked her as we reached the kitchen where the mouth-watering smell of Claudia's baking brought back a wave of childhood memories.

'Probably not until the early hours. She's managed to get on a flight from LA which takes her to Paris, and she'll fly to Geneva from there.'

The Seven Sisters

‘How did she sound?’

‘She was crying,’ Marina said. ‘Hysterically.’

‘And Star and CeCe?’

‘As usual, CeCe was in charge of their joint arrangements. I didn’t speak to Star. CeCe sounded utterly shocked, poor thing, like the wind had been taken out of her sails. They only arrived home from Vietnam ten days ago. Have some fresh bread, Maia. I’m sure you haven’t eaten anything yet this morning.’

Marina put a slice slathered with butter and jam in front of me. ‘I dread to think how they’re all going to be,’ I murmured as I took a bite.

‘They will all be as they always are, and react in their own, different ways,’ replied Marina sagely.

‘And of course, they all think they’re coming home for Pa’s funeral,’ I said with a sigh. ‘Even though it would have been a hugely upsetting event, at least it would also have been a rite of passage, a chance for us all to celebrate his life, put him to rest and then hopefully begin to move on. Now, they’ll arrive home simply to find their father gone.’

‘I know, Maia. But what’s done is done,’ said Marina sadly.

‘Surely, at the very least, there are friends or business associates that we should tell?’

‘Georg Hoffman said he would be doing all that. He called me again this morning to find out when you’d all be here, so he can arrange to come and see you. I told him I’d let him know as soon as we’d been in touch with Ally. Perhaps he can shed some light on the mysterious workings of your father’s mind.’

‘Well, I hope someone can,’ I muttered grimly.

LUCINDA RILEY

‘Now, do you mind if I leave you to eat alone? I have a thousand things to do before your sisters arrive.’

‘Of course. Thank you, Ma,’ I said. ‘I don’t know what we’d all do without you.’

‘Or I without you.’ She patted me on the shoulder and left the kitchen.

4

Just after five that evening, after an afternoon of wandering aimlessly about the gardens, then trying to settle down to some translation work in an attempt to take my mind off Pa, I heard the motor launch pulling in at the jetty. Relieved that Tiggy had finally arrived and that at least I'd no longer be alone with my thoughts, I flung open the front door and ran across the lawns to greet her.

I watched her as she emerged gracefully from the boat. Pa had often suggested that she take ballet lessons when she was younger; for Tiggy didn't walk, she floated, carrying her lithe, slim body so lightly, it was as if her feet didn't touch the ground. She had an almost other-worldly presence, with her huge liquid eyes, framed by thick eyelashes, dominating her heart-shaped face. As I watched her, I was suddenly struck by her resemblance to the fragile young deer she so ardently took care of.

'Darling Maia,' she said, stretching out her arms towards me.

We stood for a moment in a silent embrace. When she pulled back from me, I saw her eyes were brimming with tears.

LUCINDA RILEY

‘How are you?’ she asked.

‘Shell-shocked, numb . . . You?’

‘The same. Still unable to take it in,’ she replied as we began to walk towards the house, our arms clasped tightly around each other’s shoulders.

Tiggy stopped abruptly on the terrace and turned to me.

‘Is Pa . . . ?’ She glanced at the house. ‘If he is, I just need to prepare myself for a moment.’

‘No, Tiggy, he’s not in the house any longer.’

‘Oh, I suppose they’ve taken him to a . . .’ Her voice tailed off miserably at the thought.

‘Let’s go inside, have a cup of tea and I’ll explain everything.’

‘You know, I tried to feel him . . . I mean, his spirit,’ Tiggy said with a sigh. ‘But there’s simply a void; nothing there.’

‘Maybe it’s too soon to feel anything,’ I comforted, used to Tiggy’s strange ideas and not wishing to crush them with harsh pragmatism. ‘I certainly can’t,’ I added as we walked into the kitchen.

Claudia was at the sink and as she turned to see Tiggy – who I’d always suspected was her favourite – I saw the sympathy in her eyes.

‘Isn’t it just terrible?’ Tiggy said, giving her a hug. She was the only one of us who felt comfortable enough to physically embrace Claudia.

‘Yes, terrible indeed,’ agreed Claudia. ‘You and Maia go to the drawing room. I will bring tea to you in there.’

‘Where’s Ma?’ asked Tiggy as we made our way through the house.

‘Upstairs, putting the finishing touches to all your bed-

The Seven Sisters

rooms. And she probably wanted us to have some time together first,' I said as we sat down.

'She was here? I mean, she was with Pa at the end?'

'Yes.'

'But why didn't she contact us all sooner?' Tiggy asked, just as I had.

For the next half an hour, I went through the answers to all the same questions I had bombarded Marina with yesterday. I also told her that Pa's body had already been laid to rest in a lead box in the ocean, expecting her to be as outraged as I'd been. Tiggy simply gave a small shrug of understanding.

'He wanted to return to the place he loved and have his body rest there forever. And in some ways, Maia, I'm glad I didn't see him . . . *lifeless*, because now I can always remember him as he was.'

I studied my sister in surprise. Given she was the most sensitive of us all, the news of Pa's death had evidently not affected her – outwardly at least – as much as I'd envisaged. Her thick chestnut hair shone round her face in a glossy mane, and her enormous brown eyes with their habitually innocent, almost startled, expression were positively sparkling. Tiggy's calm perspective gave me hope that my other sisters might be as outwardly sanguine as she seemed, even if I wasn't.

'Ironically, you look wonderful, Tiggy,' I complimented her, voicing my thoughts. 'It seems all that fresh Scottish air must suit you.'

'Oh, it does, definitely,' she agreed. 'After all those years as a child when I had to stay indoors, I feel I've been released into the wild too. I absolutely love my job, even though it's

LUCINDA RILEY

hard work, and the cottage I'm staying in is incredibly basic. There's not even an indoor loo.'

'Wow,' I said, admiring her ability to eschew all creature comforts in order to follow her passion. 'So it's more fulfilling than working in the laboratory at Servion Zoo?'

'Oh God, completely.' Tiggy raised an eyebrow. 'To be honest, even though it was a great job, I hated it there, because I wasn't working with the animals themselves, just analysing their genetic make-up. You probably think I'm mad to give up a great career to tramp across the Highlands day and night for almost zero pay, but I find it so much more rewarding.'

She looked up and smiled at Claudia as she entered the drawing room carrying a tray, which she set down on the low table before retreating.

'I don't think you're mad, Tiggy. Really, I completely understand.'

'In fact, up until our phone call last night, I was feeling happier than I ever have.'

'It's because you've found your calling, I'm sure,' I smiled.

'Yes, that and . . . other things,' she admitted as I noticed a faint blush appear on her delicate cheekbones. 'But that's for another time. When are the others home?'

'CeCe and Star should be here by seven this evening, and Electra is arriving sometime in the small hours of the morning,' I said, pouring some tea into two cups.

'How was Electra when you told her?' Tiggy asked me. 'Actually, you don't need to answer that, I can imagine.'

'Well, it was Ma who spoke to her. I gather she was bawling her eyes out.'

'True to form, then,' said Tiggy, taking a sip of her tea.

The Seven Sisters

Then she sighed suddenly, the light disappearing from her eyes. 'It feels so odd. I keep expecting Pa to walk in at any second. And of course, he never will again.'

'No, he won't,' I agreed sadly.

'Is there anything we should do?' Tiggy asked, rising suddenly from the sofa and walking to the window to stare out. 'I feel we should be doing . . . *something*.'

'Apparently, Pa's lawyer will come and see us when we've all arrived and explain things, but for now' – I shrugged despairingly – 'all we can do is wait for the others.'

'I suppose you're right.'

I watched as Tiggy pressed her forehead against the windowpane.

'None of us really knew him, did we?' she said quietly.

'No, we didn't,' I conceded.

'Maia, can I ask you another question?'

'Of course.'

'Do you ever wonder where you came from? I mean, who your real mother and father were?'

'Of course it's crossed my mind, Tiggy, but Pa's been everything to me. He *has* been my father. So I suppose I've never needed – or wanted – to think beyond that.'

'Do you think you'd feel guilty if you did try to find out?'

'Maybe,' I replied. 'But Pa has always been enough, and I couldn't imagine a more loving or caring parent.'

'I can understand that. You two always did have a special bond. Perhaps the first child always does.'

'But each one of us had a special relationship with him. He loved us all.'

'Yes, I know he loved me,' said Tiggy calmly. 'But that hasn't stopped me from wondering where I originally came

LUCINDA RILEY

from. I thought of asking him, but I didn't want to upset him. So I never did. Anyway, it's too late now.' She stifled a yawn and said, 'Would you mind if I went up to my room and had a rest? Perhaps it's delayed shock or the fact I haven't had a day off for weeks, but I feel totally exhausted.'

'Of course not. You go and lie down, Tiggy.'

I watched as she floated across the room to the door. 'I'll see you later.'

'Sleep well,' I called as I found myself alone once again. *And* oddly irritated. Maybe it was me, but Tiggy's otherworldliness, her air of being slightly removed from all that went on around her, seemed suddenly more pronounced. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted from her; after all, I'd been dreading my sisters' reactions to the news. I should be glad that Tiggy looked to be handling it so well.

Or was the real reason I felt unsettled the fact that each of my sisters had lives that went on above and beyond Pa Salt and their childhood home, whereas both he and Atlantis had comprised my entire world?



Star and CeCe stepped off the launch just after seven and I was there to greet them both. Never one to volunteer physical affection, CeCe allowed me to clasp her briefly in my arms before pulling away.

'Shocking news, Maia,' she commented. 'Star's very shaken up.'

'I'm sure,' I replied, watching Star as she stood behind her sister, looking even paler than usual.

The Seven Sisters

‘How are you, darling?’ I asked, reaching my arms towards her.

‘Devastated,’ Star whispered, resting her head, with its glorious hair the colour of moonlight, on my shoulder for a few seconds.

‘At least we’re all together now,’ I said, as Star moved away from me and towards CeCe, who immediately wrapped her own strong, protective arm once more around her.

‘What needs to be done?’ CeCe asked as the three of us walked up towards the house.

Again, I took both of them into the drawing room and sat them down. And once more, I repeated the circumstances of Pa’s death and his wish to have a private burial with none of us in attendance.

‘So who was it that actually put Pa over the side of the boat?’ CeCe enquired, as clinically logical as only my fourth sister could be. I understood she didn’t mean to be insensitive. CeCe just wanted the facts.

‘It’s not a question I’ve asked, to be honest, but I’m sure we can find out. It was probably a member of his crew on the *Titan*.’

‘And where did it happen? I mean, near St Tropez where the yacht was moored, or did they sail out to sea? I’m sure they must have done,’ added CeCe.

Both Star and I shuddered at her need for detail. ‘Ma says he was buried in a lead casket which was already on board the *Titan*. But as to where, I really don’t know,’ I said, hoping that would be the end of CeCe’s probing.

‘Presumably, this lawyer will be telling us exactly what’s in his will?’ she persisted.

‘Yes, I should think so.’

LUCINDA RILEY

‘For all we know, we’re now destitute,’ she said with a shrug. ‘You remember how obsessed he was about us all earning our own living? I wouldn’t put it past him to have left the lot to charity,’ she added.

Even though I understood that CeCe’s natural tactlessness was almost certainly more pronounced at this moment to help her cope with her current inner pain, I’d reached my limit. I didn’t respond to her comment but instead turned to Star, sitting silently on the sofa next to her sister.

‘How are you feeling?’ I asked her gently.

‘I—’

‘She’s in shock, like we all are,’ cut in CeCe before Star could speak. ‘But we’ll get through this together, won’t we?’ she said as she reached a strong brown hand towards her sister and clasped Star’s slender, pale fingers within it. ‘It’s such a shame, because I was about to tell Pa some good news.’

‘And what is that?’ I enquired.

‘I’ve been offered a place in September on a year’s foundation course at The Royal College of Art in London.’

‘That’s wonderful news, CeCe,’ I said. Even though I’d never really understood her strange ‘installations’, as she called them, preferring a more traditional style to modern art, I knew it was her passion and I was pleased for her.

‘Yes, we’re thrilled, aren’t we?’

‘Yes,’ Star agreed obediently, although she didn’t look it. I could see her bottom lip was trembling.

‘We’ll base ourselves in London. That’s if there are still funds available after we’ve met with this lawyer of Pa’s.’

‘Honestly, CeCe,’ I said, my stretched patience finally

The Seven Sisters

snapping. 'This is hardly the moment to be thinking of such things.'

'Sorry, Maia, you know it's just my way. I loved Pa very much. He was such a brilliant man and he always encouraged me in my work.'

Just for a few seconds, I saw vulnerability and perhaps a little fear appear in CeCe's hazel-flecked eyes.

'Yes, he was one of a kind,' I affirmed.

'Right, Star, why don't you and I go upstairs and get unpacked?' CeCe suggested. 'What time's supper, Maia? We could both do with something to eat soon.'

'I'll tell Claudia to have it ready as soon as possible. Electra isn't arriving for hours and I still haven't heard from Ally.'

'We'll see you in a while then,' said CeCe, standing up, with Star following suit. 'And anything I can do, you know you simply have to ask.' CeCe smiled at me sadly as she said this. For all her insensitivity, I knew she meant it.

After they left, I pondered the enigma that was the relationship between my third and fourth sisters. Marina and I had discussed it often, both of us concerned as they grew up that Star simply hid behind the strong personality that was CeCe.

'Star seems to have no mind of her own,' I'd said time and time again. 'I haven't a clue what she really thinks about anything. Surely it can't be healthy?'

Marina had agreed wholeheartedly with me, but when I'd mentioned it to Pa Salt, he'd smiled his enigmatic smile and told me not to worry.

'One day, Star will spread her wings and fly, like the glorious angel she is. You wait and see.'

LUCINDA RILEY

This hadn't comforted me, for just as Star was reliant on CeCe, it was obvious that, for all CeCe's outward self-possession, the dependence was mutual. And if Star *did* one day do as Pa Salt had predicted, I knew CeCe would be completely lost.



Dinner that evening was a sombre affair as my three sisters began to adjust to being home, where everything around us served as a reminder of the enormity of what had been lost to us. Marina did her utmost to keep everyone's spirits up, but seemed uncertain how best to do so. She asked questions about what each of her precious girls were currently doing in their lives, but unspoken memories of Pa Salt brought sporadic tears to all our eyes. Eventually, the attempts at conversation gave way to silence.

'I'll just be glad when Ally's been located and we can move on with hearing whatever it is Pa Salt wanted to tell us,' Tiggy said with a long sigh. 'Excuse me, but I'm going up to bed.'

Kissing all of us, she left the room, followed by CeCe and Star a few minutes later.

'Oh dear,' sighed Marina, when it was just the two of us left alone at the table, 'they're all completely devastated. And I agree with Tiggy: the sooner we've located Ally and she's back, the faster we can all move on.'

'She's obviously out of mobile phone range,' I said. 'You must be completely exhausted, Ma. Go to bed and I'll stay up and wait for Electra to arrive.'

'Are you sure, *chérie*?'

The Seven Sisters

‘Yes, positive,’ I confirmed, knowing how difficult Marina had always found dealing with my youngest sister.

‘Thank you, Maia,’ she said, acquiescing without further protest. She rose from the table, kissed me gently on the top of my head and left the kitchen.

For the next half an hour, I insisted on helping Claudia clear up from the evening meal, simply grateful for something to do while I waited for Electra. Used to Claudia’s lack of small talk, tonight I found her steady and silent presence particularly comforting.

‘Shall I lock up, Miss Maia?’ she asked me.

‘No, you’ve had a long day too. Go to bed and I’ll see to it.’

‘As you wish. *Gute Nacht,*’ she said as she left the kitchen.

Wandering through the house, knowing it would be at least a couple of hours before Electra arrived and feeling wide awake due to my unusually long lie-in that morning, I arrived at the door to Pa Salt’s study. I had an urge to feel him around me, so I turned the door handle, only to find that it was locked.

This surprised and disturbed me; during the many hours he’d spent in the room working from home, the door had always been freely open to us girls. He’d never been too busy to offer a welcoming smile at my timid knock, and I’d always enjoyed sitting in his study, which contained the physical and material essence of him. Even though banks of computers sat on his desk and a large video screen hung on the wall in readiness for satellite conference calls, my eyes always strayed to the personal treasures placed randomly on the shelves behind the desk.

These were simple objects that he’d told me he’d collected

LUCINDA RILEY

during his constant travels around the world – amongst other things, a delicate gilt-framed miniature of the Madonna, which could fit in the palm of my hand, an old fiddle, a battered leather pouch and a tattered book by an English poet I'd never heard of.

Nothing rare, nothing particularly valuable that I knew of, just objects that all meant something to him.

Even though I was certain that a man such as Pa could have filled our home with priceless works of art and exquisite antiques if he'd so desired, in reality it did not contain many hugely costly artefacts. If anything, I'd always felt he'd had an aversion to inanimate material possessions of any great worth. He'd derided his wealthy contemporaries vociferously when they'd paid exorbitant sums for famous works of art, telling me that most of them ended up locked away in their strong rooms for fear of their being stolen.

'Art should be on display to all,' he'd said to me. 'It is a gift to the soul from the painter. A painting that has to be hidden from sight is worthless.'

When I'd dared to mention the fact that he himself owned a private jet and a large luxury yacht, he'd raised an eyebrow at me.

'But Maia, can't you see that both those things are simply a mode of transportation? They provide a practical service, a means to an end. And if they went up in flames tomorrow, I could easily replace them. It's enough for me to have my six human works of art: my daughters. The only things on earth worth treasuring, because you are all irreplaceable. People who you love *are* irreplaceable, Maia. Remember that, won't you?'

These were words he'd spoken to me many years before

The Seven Sisters

and that had never left me. I only wished with every fibre in my body that I'd remembered them when I should have done.

I walked away emotionally empty-handed from the door of Pa Salt's study, and went into the drawing room, still wondering why on earth the room had been locked. I'd ask Marina tomorrow, I thought, as I walked across to an occasional table and picked up a photograph. It had been taken aboard the *Titan* a few years ago, and showed Pa, surrounded by all of us sisters, leaning against the railing on the deck of the yacht. He was smiling broadly, his handsome features relaxed, his full head of greying hair swept back by the sea wind, and his still toned and muscular body bronzed by the sun.

'Who *were* you?' I asked the photograph with a frown.

For want of anything better to do, I switched on the television and flicked through the channels until I found the news. As usual, the bulletin was full of war, pain and destruction and I was just about to switch channels when the newsreader announced that the body of Kreeg Eszu, a famous captain of industry who ran a vast international communications company, had been found washed up in a cove on a Greek island.

I listened intently, the remote control frozen in my hand, as the newsreader explained how his family had announced that Kreeg had recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer. The inference was that, given the diagnosis, he had decided to take his own life.

My heart began to beat faster. Not only because my father, too, had recently chosen to spend eternity at the bottom of the ocean, but because this story had a direct connection to *me . . .*

LUCINDA RILEY

The newsreader stated that his son, Zed, who'd been working alongside his father for a number of years, would be taking over with immediate effect as Chief Executive of Athenian Holdings. An image of Zed flashed up on the screen and I instinctively closed my eyes.

'Oh God,' I groaned, wondering why fate had decided to choose this moment to remind me of a man I'd spent the past fourteen years desperately trying to forget.

So it seemed that, ironically, within the space of a few hours, both of us had lost our fathers to a watery grave.

I stood up, pacing the room, trying to remove the image of his face – which seemed if anything even more handsome than I'd remembered it – from my mind.

Think about the pain he caused you, Maia, I told myself. It's over, it was over years ago. Don't go back there, whatever you do.

But of course, as I sighed and sank down onto the sofa, drained of energy, I knew it could never truly be over.