

Star

July 2007



Astrantia major
(great masterwort – *Apiaceae* family)

Name derived from the Latin for 'star'

1

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

With my pen still suspended above the sheet of paper, I looked up at the July sun – or, at least, the small ray of it that had managed to trickle between the window and the red-brick wall a few yards in front of me. All of the windows in our tiny apartment looked onto its blandness and, despite today’s beautiful weather, it was dark inside. So very different from my childhood home, Atlantis, on the shores of Lake Geneva.

I realised I had been seated exactly where I was now when CeCe had come into our miserable little sitting room to tell me that Pa Salt was dead.

I put down the pen and went to pour myself a glass of water from the tap. It was clammy and airless in the sticky heat and I drank thirstily as I contemplated the fact that I didn’t *need* to do this – to put myself through the pain of remembering. It was Tiggy, my younger sister, who, when I’d seen her at Atlantis just after Pa died, had suggested the idea.

‘Darling Star,’ she’d said, when some of us sisters had gone out onto the lake to sail, simply trying to distract ourselves

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from our grief, ‘I know you find it hard to *speak* about how you feel. I also know you’re full of pain. Why don’t you write your thoughts down?’

On the plane home from Atlantis two weeks ago, I’d thought about what Tiggy had said. And this morning, that’s what I had endeavoured to do.

I stared at the brick wall, thinking wryly that it was a perfect metaphor for my life just now, which at least made me smile. And the smile carried me back to the scarred wooden table that our shady landlord must have picked up for nothing in a junk shop. I sat back down and again picked up the elegant ink pen Pa Salt had given me for my twenty-first birthday.

‘I will not start with Pa’s death,’ I said out loud. ‘I will start when we arrived here in London—’

The crash of the front door closing startled me and I knew it was my sister, CeCe. Everything she did was loud. It seemed beyond her to put a cup of coffee down without banging it onto the surface and slopping its contents everywhere. She had also never grasped the concept of an ‘indoor voice’ and shouted her words to the point where, when we were small, Ma was once worried enough to get her hearing tested. Of course, there was nothing wrong with it. In fact, it was the opposite – CeCe’s hearing was overdeveloped. There was nothing wrong with me when a year later Ma took me to a speech therapist, concerned at my lack of chatter.

‘She has words there, she just prefers not to use them,’ the therapist had explained. ‘She will when she’s ready.’

At home, in an attempt to communicate with me, Ma had taught me the basics of French sign language.

‘So whenever you want or need something,’ she’d said to

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me, ‘you can use it to tell me how you feel. And this is how I feel about you right now.’ She’d pointed at herself, crossed her palms over her heart, then pointed at me. ‘I – love – you.’

CeCe had learnt it quickly too, and the two of us had adopted and expanded what had begun as a means of communication with Ma to form our own private language – a mixture of signs and made-up words – using it when people were around and we needed to talk. We’d both enjoyed the baffled looks on our sisters’ faces as I’d sign a sly comment across the breakfast table and we’d both dissolve into helpless giggles.

Looking back, I could see that CeCe and I became the antithesis of each other as we were growing up: the less I spoke, the louder and more often she talked for me. And the more she did, the less I needed to. Our personalities had simply become exaggerated. It hadn’t seemed to matter when we were children, squashed into the middle of our six-sister family – we’d had each other to turn to.

The problem was, it mattered now . . .

‘Guess what? I’ve found it!’ CeCe burst into the sitting room. ‘And in a few weeks’ time we can move in. The developer’s still got some finishing off to do, but it’ll be incredible when it’s done. God, it’s hot in here. I can’t wait to leave this place.’

CeCe went to the kitchen and I heard the whoosh of the tap being turned on full blast, knowing that the water had most likely splattered all over the worktops I had painstakingly wiped down earlier.

‘Want some water, Sia?’

‘No thanks.’ Although CeCe only used it when we were alone, I mentally chided myself for being irritated by the pet

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name she had coined for me when we were little. It came from a book Pa Salt had given me for Christmas, *The Story of Anastasia*, about a young girl who lived in the woods in Russia and discovered she was a princess.

‘She looks like you, Star,’ five-year-old CeCe had said as we’d stared at the pictures in the storybook. ‘Perhaps *you’re* a princess too – you’re pretty enough to be one, with your golden hair and blue eyes. So, I will call you “Sia”. And it goes perfectly with “Cee”! Cee and Sia – the twins!’ She’d clapped her hands in delight.

It was only later, when I’d learnt the *real* history of the Russian royal family, that I understood what had happened to Anastasia Romanova and her siblings. It hadn’t been a fairy tale at all.

And nor was I a child any longer, but a grown woman of twenty-seven.

‘I just know you’re going to love the apartment.’ CeCe reappeared in the sitting room and flopped onto the scuffed leather sofa. ‘I’ve booked an appointment for us to see it tomorrow morning. It’s a shedload of money, but I can afford it now, especially as the agent told me the City is in turmoil. The usual suspects aren’t queuing up to buy right now, so we agreed a knockdown price. It’s time we got ourselves a proper home.’

It’s time I got myself a proper life, I thought.

‘You’re *buying* it?’ I said.

‘Yes. Or at least, I will if you like it.’

I was so astonished, I didn’t know what to say.

‘You all right, Sia? You look tired. Didn’t you sleep well last night?’

‘No.’ Despite my best efforts, tears came to my eyes as I thought of the long, sleepless hours bleeding towards dawn,

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when I'd mourned my beloved father, still unable to believe he was gone.

'You're still in shock, that's the problem. It only happened a couple of weeks ago, after all. You will feel better, I swear, especially when you've seen our new apartment tomorrow. It's this crap place that's depressing you. It sure as hell depresses me,' she added. 'Have you emailed the guy about the cookery course yet?'

'Yes.'

'And when does it start?'

'Next week.'

'Good. That gives us time to start choosing some furniture for our new home.' CeCe came over to me and gave me a spontaneous hug. 'I can't wait to show it to you.'



'Isn't it incredible?'

CeCe opened her arms wide to embrace the cavernous space, her voice echoing off the walls as she walked to the expanse of glass frontage and slid open one of the panels.

'And look, this balcony is for you,' she said, as she beckoned me to follow her. We stepped outside. 'Balcony' was too humble a word to describe what we were standing on. It was more like a long and beautiful terrace suspended in the air above the River Thames. 'You can fill it with all your herbs and those flowers you liked fiddling around with at Atlantis,' CeCe added as she walked to the railing and surveyed the grey water far below us. 'Isn't it spectacular?'

I nodded, but she was already on her way back inside so I drifted after her.

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‘The kitchen is still to be fitted, but as soon as I’ve signed, you can have free rein to choose which cooker you’d like, which fridge, and so on. Now that you’re going to be a professional,’ she said with a wink.

‘Hardly, CeCe. I’m only doing a short course.’

‘But you’re so talented, I’m sure you’ll get a job somewhere when they see what you can do. Anyway, I think it’s perfect for both of us, don’t you? I can use that end for my studio.’ She pointed to an area sandwiched between the far wall and a spiral staircase. ‘The light is just fantastic. And you get your big kitchen and the outdoor space, too. It’s the nearest thing to Atlantis I could find in the centre of London.’

‘Yes. It’s lovely, thank you.’

I could see how excited she was about her find and, admittedly, the apartment *was* impressive. I didn’t want to burst her bubble by telling her the truth: that living in what amounted to a vast, characterless glass box overlooking a murky river could not have been further from Atlantis if it tried.

As CeCe and the agent talked about the blonde-wood floors that were going to be laid, I shook my head at my negative thoughts. I knew that I was being desperately spoiled. After all, compared to the streets of Delhi, or the shanty towns I’d seen on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, a brand-new apartment in the city of London was not exactly a hardship.

But the point was that I would have actually *preferred* a tiny, basic hut – which would at least have its foundations planted firmly in the ground – with a front door that led directly to a patch of earth outside.

I tuned in vaguely to CeCe’s chatter about a remote control that opened and closed the window blinds and another

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for the invisible surround-sound speakers. Behind the agent's back, she signed 'wide boy' to me and rolled her eyes. I managed a small smile in return, feeling desperately claustrophobic because I couldn't open the door and just *run* . . . Cities stifled me; I found the noise, the smells and the hordes of people overwhelming. But at least the apartment was open and airy . . .

'Sia?'

'Sorry, Cee, what did you say?'

'Shall we go upstairs and see our bedroom?'

We walked up the spiral staircase into the room CeCe said we would share, despite there being a spare room. And I felt a shudder run through me even as I looked at the views, which *were* spectacular from up here. We then inspected the incredible en-suite bathroom, and I knew that CeCe had done her absolute best to find something lovely that suited us both.

But the truth was, we weren't married. We were *sisters*.

Afterwards, CeCe insisted on dragging me to a furniture shop on the King's Road, then we took the bus back across the river, over Albert Bridge.

'This bridge is named after Queen Victoria's husband,' I told her out of habit. 'And there's a memorial to him in Kensington—'

CeCe curtailed me by making the sign for 'show-off' in my face. 'Honestly, Star, don't tell me you're still lugging a guidebook around?'

'Yes,' I admitted, making our sign for 'nerd'. I loved history.

We got off the bus near our apartment and CeCe turned to me. 'Let's get supper down the road. We should celebrate.'

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‘We haven’t got the money.’ *Or at least, I thought, I certainly haven’t.*

‘My treat,’ CeCe reassured me.

We went to a local pub and CeCe ordered a bottle of beer for her and a small glass of wine for me. Neither of us drank much – CeCe in particular couldn’t handle her alcohol, something she’d learnt the hard way after a particularly raucous teenage party. As she stood at the bar, I mused on the mysterious appearance of the funds that CeCe had suddenly come into the day after all of us sisters had been handed envelopes from Pa Salt by Georg Hoffman, Pa’s lawyer. CeCe had gone to see him in Geneva. She had begged Georg to let me come into the meeting with her, but he’d refused point-blank.

‘Sadly, I have to follow my client’s instructions. Your father insisted that any meetings I might have with his daughters be conducted individually.’

So I’d waited in reception while she went in to see him. When she’d emerged, I could see that she was tense and excited.

‘Sorry, Sia, but I had to sign some stupid privacy clause. Probably another of Pa’s little games. All I can tell you is that it’s good news.’

As far as I was aware, it was the only secret that CeCe had ever kept from me in our entire relationship, and I still had no idea where all this money had come from. Georg Hoffman had explained to us that Pa’s will made it clear that we would continue to receive only our very basic allowances. But also, that we were free to go to him for extra money if necessary. So perhaps we simply needed to ask, just as CeCe presumably had.

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‘Cheers!’ CeCe clinked her beer bottle against my glass. ‘Here’s to our new life in London.’

‘And here’s to Pa Salt,’ I said, raising my glass.

‘Yes,’ she agreed. ‘You really loved him, didn’t you?’

‘Didn’t *you*?’

‘Of course I did, lots. He was . . . special.’

I watched CeCe as our food arrived and she ate hungrily, thinking that, even though we were both his daughters, his death felt like my sorrow alone, rather than ours.

‘Do you think we should buy the apartment?’

‘CeCe, it’s your decision. I’m not paying, so it’s not for me to comment.’

‘Don’t be silly, you know what’s mine is yours, and vice versa. Besides, if you ever decide to open that envelope he left for you, there’s no telling what you might find out,’ she encouraged.

She’d been on at me ever since we’d been given the envelopes. She had torn hers open almost immediately afterwards, expecting me to do the same.

‘Come on, Sia, aren’t you going to open it?’ she’d pressed me.

But I just couldn’t . . . because whatever lay inside it would mean accepting that Pa had gone. And I wasn’t prepared to let him go yet.

After we’d eaten, CeCe paid the bill and we went back to the apartment, where she telephoned her bank to have the deposit on the flat transferred. Then she settled herself in front of her laptop, complaining about the inconstant broadband.

‘Come and help me choose some sofas,’ she called from the sitting room as I filled our yellowing tub with lukewarm water.

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‘I’m just having a bath,’ I replied, locking the door.

I lay in the water and lowered my head so that my ears and hair were submerged. I listened to the gloopy sounds – *womb sounds*, I thought – and decided that I had to get away before I went completely mad. None of this was CeCe’s fault and I certainly didn’t want to take it out on her. I loved her. She had been there for me every day of my life, but . . .

Twenty minutes later, having made a resolution, I wandered into the sitting room.

‘Nice bath?’

‘Yes. CeCe . . .’

‘Come and look at the sofas I’ve found.’ She beckoned me towards her. I did as she asked and stared unseeingly at the different hues of cream.

‘Which one do you think?’

‘Whichever you like. Interior design is your thing, not mine.’

‘How about that one?’ CeCe pointed to the screen. ‘Obviously we’ll have to go and sit on it, because it can’t just be a thing of beauty. It’s got to be comfy as well.’ She scribbled down the name and address of the stockist. ‘Perhaps we can do that tomorrow?’

I took a deep breath. ‘CeCe, would you mind if I went back to Atlantis for a couple of days?’

‘If that’s what you want, Sia, of course. I’ll check out flights for us.’

‘Actually, I was thinking I’d go alone. I mean . . .’ I swallowed, steeling myself not to lose my impetus. ‘You’re very busy here now with the apartment and everything, and I know you have all sorts of art projects you’re eager to get going on.’

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‘Yes, but a couple of days out won’t hurt. And if it’s what you need to do, I understand.’

‘Really,’ I said firmly, ‘I think I’d prefer to go by myself.’

‘Why?’ CeCe turned to me, her almond-shaped eyes wide with surprise.

‘Just because . . . I . . . would. That is, I want to sit in the garden I helped Pa Salt make and open my letter.’

‘I see. Sure, fine,’ she said with a shrug.

I sensed a layer of frost descending, but I would not give in to her this time. ‘I’m going to bed. I have a really bad headache,’ I said.

‘I’ll get you some painkillers. Do you want me to look up flights?’

‘I’ve already taken some, and yes, that would be great, thanks. Night.’ I leant forward and kissed my sister on the top of her shiny dark head, her curly hair shorn into a boyish crop as always. Then I walked into the tiny broom cupboard of a twin room that we shared.

The bed was hard and narrow and the mattress thin. Though both of us had had the luxury of a privileged upbringing, we had spent the past six years travelling round the world and sleeping in dumps, neither of us prepared to ask Pa Salt for money even when we’d been really broke. CeCe in particular had always been too proud, which was why I was so surprised that she now seemed to be spending money like water, when it could only have come from *him*.

Perhaps I’d ask Ma if she knew anything more, but I was aware that discretion was her middle name when it came to spreading gossip amongst us sisters.

‘Atlantis,’ I murmured. *Freedom* . . .

And that night, I fell asleep almost immediately.

2

Christian was waiting for me with the boat when the taxi brought me to the pontoon moored on Lake Geneva. He greeted me with his usual warm smile and I wondered for the first time how old he really was. Even though I was certain he'd been the skipper of our speedboat since I was a little girl, with his dark hair and bronzed olive skin covering a finely toned physique, he still didn't look a day over thirty-five.

We set off across the lake, and I leant back on the comfortable leather bench at the stern of the boat, thinking about how the staff who worked at Atlantis never seemed to age. As the sun shone down and I breathed in the familiar fresh air, I mused that perhaps Atlantis *was* enchanted and those who lived within its walls had been granted the gift of eternal life and would be there forever.

All except Pa Salt . . .

I could hardly bear to think about the last time I was here. All six of us sisters – each one adopted and brought home from the far corners of the earth by Pa Salt and named in turn after the Seven Sisters of the Pleiades – had gathered at our childhood home because he had died. There hadn't even been

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a funeral, an occasion for us to mourn his loss; Ma told us he had insisted on being buried privately at sea.

All we'd had was his Swiss lawyer, Georg Hoffman, showing us what at first glance seemed to be an elaborate sundial, which had appeared overnight in Pa's special garden. But Georg had explained that it was something called an armillary sphere and that it plotted the position of the stars. And engraved on the bands that circled its central golden globe were our names and a set of coordinates that would tell us exactly where Pa had found each of us, along with a quotation written in Greek.

Maia and Ally, my two elder sisters, had provided the rest of us with the locations the coordinates pinpointed and the meanings of our Greek inscriptions. Both of mine were as yet unread. I had stowed them in a plastic wallet along with the letter Pa Salt had written to me.

The boat began to slow down and I caught glimpses of the beautiful house we had all grown up in, through the veil of trees that shrouded it from view. It looked like a fairy-tale castle with its light pink exterior and four turrets, the windows glinting in the sunlight.

After we had been shown the armillary sphere and handed the letters, CeCe had been eager to leave. I hadn't; I'd wanted to at least spend a little time mourning Pa Salt in the house where he had raised me with such love. Now, two weeks on, I was back, desperately in search of the strength and solitude I needed to come to terms with his death and carry on.

Christian steered the boat into the jetty and secured the ropes. He helped me out and I saw Ma walking across the grass towards me, as she'd done every time I'd returned

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home. Just the sight of her brought tears to my eyes, and I leant into her welcoming arms for a warm hug.

‘Star, what a treat to have you back here with me,’ Ma crooned as she kissed me on both cheeks and stood back to look at me. ‘I will not say you are too thin, because you are always too thin,’ she said with a smile as she led me towards the house. ‘Claudia has made your favourite – apple strudel – and the kettle is already boiling.’ She indicated the table on the terrace. ‘Sit there and enjoy the last of the sun. I’ll take your holdall inside and have Claudia bring out the tea and pastry.’

I watched her disappear inside the house, and then turned to take in the abundantly stocked gardens and pristine lawn. I saw Christian walking up the discreet path to the apartment built over the boathouse, which was tucked into a cove beyond the main gardens of the house. The well-oiled machine that was Atlantis still continued, even if its original inventor was no longer here.

Ma reappeared, Claudia following with a tea tray. I smiled up at her, knowing that Claudia spoke even more rarely than I, and would never start a conversation.

‘Hello, Claudia. How are you?’

‘I am well, thank you,’ she replied in her heavy German accent. All of us girls were bilingual, speaking French and English from the cradle at Pa’s insistence, and we only spoke English to Claudia. Ma was French through and through. Her heritage was visible in her simple but immaculate silk blouse and skirt, her hair drawn back into a chignon. Communicating with them both meant we girls grew up being able to swap languages instantaneously.

‘I see you still haven’t had a haircut,’ Ma smiled, gesturing

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to my long blonde fringe. ‘So, how are you, *chérie*?’ She poured the tea as Claudia retreated.

‘Okay.’

‘Well, I know that you are not. None of us are. How can we be, when this terrible thing happened so recently?’

‘No,’ I agreed as she passed me my tea and I added milk and three teaspoons of sugar. Contrary to my sisters’ teasing about my thinness, I had a very sweet tooth and indulged it often.

‘How is CeCe?’

‘She says she’s fine, though I don’t really know whether she is.’

‘Grief affects us all in very different ways,’ Ma mused. ‘And often, it prompts changes. Did you know that Maia has flown to Brazil?’

‘Yes, she sent me and CeCe an email a few days ago. Do you know why?’

‘I must presume it has something to do with the letter your father left her. But whatever the reason, I am happy for her. It would have been a dreadful thing for her to stay here alone and mourn him. She is too young to hide herself away. After all, you know so well how travel can broaden one’s horizon.’

‘I do. But I’ve had enough of travelling now.’

‘Have you, Star?’

I nodded, suddenly feeling the weight of the conversation on my shoulders. Normally, CeCe would be beside me to speak for us both. But Ma remained silent so I had to continue on my own.

‘I’ve seen enough.’

‘I’m sure you have,’ Ma replied with a soft chuckle. ‘Is there anywhere you two haven’t visited in the past five years?’

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‘Australia and the Amazon.’

‘Why those places in particular?’

‘CeCe is terrified of spiders.’

‘Of course!’ Ma clapped her hands together as she remembered. ‘Yet it seemed there was nothing she was afraid of as a child. You must recollect how she was always jumping off the highest rocks into the sea.’

‘Or climbing up them,’ I added.

‘And do you recall how she could hold her breath under water for so long, I’d worry she had drowned?’

‘I do,’ I said grimly, thinking back to how she had tried to persuade me to join her in her extreme sports. That was one thing I had put my foot down about. During our travels in the Far East, she would spend hours scuba diving, or attempting to scale the vertiginous volcanic plugs of Thailand and Vietnam. But whether she was below the surface of the water or high above me, I would lie immobile on the sand reading a book.

‘And she always hated wearing shoes . . . I had to force her into them as a small child,’ said Ma with a smile.

‘She threw them into the lake once.’ I pointed to the calm water. ‘I had to persuade her to go and get them.’

‘She was always a free spirit,’ Ma sighed. ‘But so brave . . . And then, one day, when she was maybe seven, I heard a big scream from your room and I thought that perhaps CeCe was being murdered. But no, just a spider the size of a twenty-centime piece on the ceiling above her. Who would have thought it?’ She shook her head at the memory.

‘She’s also afraid of the dark.’

‘Well, that is something I did not know.’ Ma’s eyes clouded over and I felt I had somehow insulted her mothering skills

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– this woman who had been employed by Pa Salt to care for us adopted babies, who became children and then young women under her watch; to act *in loco parentis* when Pa was abroad on his travels. She had no genetic link to any of us. And yet, she meant so very much to us all.

‘She’s embarrassed to tell anyone she has bad nightmares.’

‘So that’s why you moved into her room?’ she said, understanding after all these years. ‘And why you asked me if you could have a night-light shortly afterwards?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought that it was for you, Star. I suppose it only shows we can never know those we have brought up as well as we think we do. So, how is London?’

‘I like it, but we’ve only been there a short time. And . . .’ I sighed, not able to put my devastation into words.

‘You are grieving,’ Ma finished for me. ‘And perhaps you feel that wherever you are just now wouldn’t matter.’

‘Yes, but I did want to come here.’

‘And, *chérie*, it is a pleasure to have you, especially all to myself. That has not happened often, has it?’

‘No.’

‘Do you wish it to happen more, Star?’

‘I . . . yes.’

‘It is a natural progression. Neither you nor CeCe are children any longer. That does not mean you cannot stay close, but it is important for you both to have your own lives. I am sure CeCe must feel that too.’

‘No, Ma, she doesn’t. She needs me. I can’t leave her,’ I blurted out suddenly as all the frustration and fear and . . . *anger* at myself and the situation bubbled up inside me. Despite my powers of self-restraint, I could not hold back the

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sudden enormous sob that rose up from the depths of my soul.

‘Oh *chérie*.’ Ma stood up and a shadow crossed the sun as she knelt down in front of me, taking my hands. ‘Don’t be ashamed. It is healthy to let it out.’

And I did. I couldn’t call it crying, because it sounded far more like howling, as all the unspoken words and feelings locked inside me seemed to pour out in a torrent.

‘Sorry, sorry . . .’ I muttered, when Ma pulled a pack of tissues from her pocket to mop up the tidal wave of tears. ‘Just . . . upset ’bout Pa . . .’

‘Of course you are, and really, there is no need to apologise,’ she said gently, as I sat there feeling like a car whose petrol tank had just completely emptied. ‘I have often worried that you keep so much hidden inside. So, now I am happier,’ she smiled, ‘even if you are not. Now, may I suggest that you take yourself upstairs to your bedroom and freshen up before supper?’

I followed her inside. The house had such a very particular smell, which I’d often tried to deconstruct so that I could recreate it in my own temporary homes – a hint of lemon, cedar wood, freshly baked cakes . . . but of course, it was more than the sum of its original parts and simply unique to Atlantis.

‘Do you wish me to come up with you?’ Ma asked as I mounted the stairs.

‘No. I’ll be fine.’

‘We will talk again later, *chérie*, but if you need me, you know where I am.’

I arrived on the upper floor of the house where all we girls had our bedrooms. Ma also had a suite just along the hall, with its own small sitting room and bathroom. The room I

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shared with CeCe was between Ally's bedroom and Tiggy's. I opened the door and smiled at the colour of three of the walls. CeCe had been going through a 'goth' stage when she was fifteen and had wanted to paint them black. I had drawn the line at that, and suggested we compromise on purple. CeCe had insisted she would decorate the fourth wall by her bed herself.

After a day locked inside our bedroom, a glassy-eyed CeCe had emerged just before midnight.

'You can see it now,' she'd said, ushering me inside.

I'd stared up at the wall and was struck by the vibrancy of the colours: a vivid midnight-blue background interspersed with splashes of a lighter cerulean, and in the centre, a gorgeously bright and flaming cluster of gold stars. The shape was immediately familiar – CeCe had painted the Seven Sisters of the Pleiades . . . *us*.

As my sight adjusted, I'd realised that each star was formed out of small, precise dots, like little atoms combining to bring the whole to life.

I'd felt the pressure of her presence behind me, her apprehensive breath at my shoulder.

'CeCe, this is amazing! Incredible, really. How did you think it up?'

'I didn't. I just' – she'd shrugged – 'knew what to do.'

Since then, I'd had plenty of time to stare at the wall from my bed, and continued to find some tiny detail that I'd never noticed before.

Yet, even though our sisters and Pa had complimented her effusively on it, she had not repeated the style again.

'Oh, that was just something that came to me. I've moved on since then,' she'd said.

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Looking at it now, even twelve years on, I still thought the mural was the most imaginative and beautiful work of art CeCe had ever produced.

Seeing that my holdall had already been unpacked for me, the few clothes neatly folded on the chair, I sat down on the bed, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. There was almost nothing of 'me' in the bedroom at all. And I had no one to blame but myself.

I walked over to my chest of drawers, pulled the bottom drawer open and took out the old biscuit tin in which I had stored my most precious keepsakes. Sitting back down on the bed, I put it on my knees and opened the lid, drawing out an envelope. After its seventeen years' sitting in the tin, it felt dry yet smooth beneath my fingers. Sliding out the contents, I looked at the heavy vellum notecard that still had the pressed flower attached to it.

Well, my darling Star, we managed to grow it after all.

Pa x

My fingers traced over the delicate petals – gossamer-thin, but still containing a faded memory of the vibrant claret hue that had graced the very first flowering of our plant, in the garden I'd helped Pa create during the school holidays.

It had meant getting up early, before CeCe awoke. She was a heavy sleeper, especially after the nightmares – which tended to arrive between the hours of two and four – so she never noticed my dawn absences. Pa would meet me in the garden, looking as though he had been up for hours, and perhaps he had been. I would be sleepy-eyed, but excited by whatever it was he had to show me.

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Sometimes it was merely a few seeds in his hand; other times a delicate fledgling plant he'd brought home from wherever he'd travelled to. We would sit on the bench in the rose arbour with his huge and very old botanical encyclopaedia and his strong brown hands would turn the pages until we found the provenance of our treasure. Having read about its natural habitat, and its likes and dislikes, we would then hunt around the garden and decide between us the best place to put it.

In reality, I thought now, he would suggest and I would agree. But it had never felt like that. It had felt as though my opinion mattered.

I often recalled the parable from the Bible he'd recounted to me once as we worked: that every living thing needed to be nurtured carefully from the start of its life. And if it was, it would eventually grow strong and last for years to come.

'Of course, we humans are just like seeds,' Pa had said with a smile as I used my child-sized watering can and he brushed the sweet-smelling peat from his hands. 'With the sun and the rain . . . and love, we have everything we need.'

And indeed, our garden flourished, and through those special mornings gardening with Pa, I learnt the art of patience. When sometimes, a few days later, I'd return to the spot to see if our plant had begun to grow, and found there was either no change or that the plant looked brown and dead, I would ask Pa why it wasn't sprouting.

'Star,' he would say, as he took my face in his weathered palms, 'anything of lasting value takes time to come to fruition. And once it does, you will be glad you persevered.'

So, I thought, closing the tin, *tomorrow I will wake up early and go back to our garden.*

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Ma and I ate together that evening at a candlelit table on the terrace. Claudia had provided a perfectly cooked rack of lamb with glazed baby carrots and fresh broccoli from the kitchen garden. The more I started to understand about cooking, the more I realised how gifted she actually was.

As we finished our meal, Ma turned to me. ‘Have you decided where you will settle yet?’

‘CeCe has her art foundation course in London.’

‘I know, but I am asking about you, Star.’

‘She’s buying an apartment overlooking the River Thames. We’ll be moving in there next month.’

‘I see. Do you like it?’

‘It’s very . . . big.’

‘That’s not what I asked.’

‘I can live there, Ma. It really is a fantastic place,’ I added, feeling guilty about my reticence.

‘And you will take your cookery course while CeCe makes her art?’

‘I will.’

‘I thought you might be a writer when you were younger,’ she said. ‘After all, you took a degree in English Literature.’

‘I love reading, yes.’

‘Star, you underestimate yourself. I still remember the stories you used to write as a child. Pa read them to me sometimes.’

‘Did he?’ The thought filled me with pride.

‘Yes. And don’t forget, you were offered a place at Cambridge University, but you didn’t accept it.’

‘No.’ Even I heard the abruptness of my tone. It was a

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moment I still found painful to dwell on, even nine years later . . .

‘You don’t mind if I try for Cambridge, do you, Cee?’ I’d asked my sister. ‘My teachers think I should.’

‘Course not, Sia. You’re so clever, I’m sure you’ll get in! I’ll have a look at unis in England too, though I doubt I’ll get an offer anywhere. You know what a dunce I am. If I don’t, I’ll just come with you and take a job behind a bar or something,’ she’d said with a shrug. ‘I don’t care. The most important thing is that we’re together, isn’t it?’

At the time, I had absolutely felt that it was. At home, and at boarding school, where the other girls sensed our closeness and left us to our own devices, we were everything to each other. So we agreed on other universities that had degree courses we both liked the sound of, which meant we could stay together. I did try for Cambridge, and to my amazement, was offered a place at Selwyn College, subject to getting the grades in my final exams.

I’d sat in Pa’s study at Christmas, watching him read the offer letter. He’d looked up at me and I’d relished the pride and emotion in his eyes. He’d pointed to the little fir tree bedecked in ancient decorations. Perched atop it, there shone a bright silver star.

‘There you are,’ he’d said with a smile. ‘Will you accept the offer?’

‘I . . . don’t know. I’ll see what happens with CeCe.’

‘Well, it must be your decision. All I can say is that at some point, you must do what is right for you,’ he’d added pointedly.

Subsequently, CeCe and I each got two offers to universities

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we'd jointly applied for, then we both took our exams and waited nervously to get our results.

Two months later, the pair of us were sitting with our sisters on the middle deck of the *Titan*, Pa's magnificent yacht. We were on our annual cruise – that year sailing around the coast of the south of France – nervously clutching the envelopes with our *maturité* grades inside. Pa had just handed them to us from the pile of mail that was delivered by speed-boat every other day, wherever we were on the water.

'So, girls,' Pa had said, smiling at our tense expressions, 'do you wish to open them here, or in private?'

'Might as well get it over with,' CeCe had said. 'You open yours first, Star. I know I'll have probably failed anyway.'

With all of my sisters and Pa looking on, I'd opened the envelope with trembling fingers and pulled out the sheets of paper inside.

'Well?' Maia had asked as I took a long time to read the results.

'I got a 5.4 overall . . . and a 6 in English.'

Everyone burst into cheers and applause, and I was squeezed into a tight embrace by my sisters.

'Your turn now, CeCe,' Electra, our youngest sister, had said with a glint in her eye. We all knew CeCe had struggled at school due to her dyslexia, whereas Electra was capable of passing any exam she chose to, but was simply lazy.

'Whatever it says, I don't care,' CeCe had said defensively, and I'd signed 'good luck' and 'love you' to her. She had ripped the envelope open and I'd held my breath as her eyes skimmed over her results.

'I . . . oh my God! I . . .'

We had all collectively held our breath.

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'I passed! Star, I passed! It means I'm in to Sussex to study Art History.'

'That's wonderful!' I had replied, knowing how hard she had worked, but I'd also seen Pa's quizzical expression as he'd looked at me. Because he knew the decision I would now have to make.

'Congratulations, darling,' Pa Salt had said, smiling at CeCe. 'Sussex is a beautiful part of the world, and, of course, that's where the Seven Sisters cliffs are.'

Later, CeCe and I had sat on the top deck of the boat, watching a glorious sunset over the Mediterranean.

'I totally understand if you want to take the Cambridge offer, Sia, rather than coming to Sussex and studying there with me. Like, I wouldn't want to stand in your way or anything. But . . .' Her bottom lip had wobbled. 'I don't know what I'll do without you. God knows how I'll cope writing those essays without you to help me.'

That night on the boat, I'd heard CeCe stirring and moaning under her breath. And I'd known one of her terrible nightmares was beginning. By now adept at recognising the signs, I'd risen from my bed and slipped into hers, muttering soothing noises, but equally certain I would not be able to wake her. Her moaning had grown louder and she began to shout indecipherable words I had given up trying to understand.

How can I leave her? She needs me . . . and I need her . . .

And I did, back then.

So I had turned down Cambridge and taken up my offer at Sussex with my sister. And midway through the third term of her three-year course, CeCe had announced she was dropping out.

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‘You understand, don’t you, Sia?’ she’d said. ‘I know how to paint and draw, but I can’t for the life of me put together an essay on Renaissance painters and all their endless bloody paintings of the Madonna. I can’t do it. Sorry, but I can’t.’

CeCe and I had subsequently left the room we’d shared in halls and rented a dingy flat together. And while I went to lectures, she had taken the bus to Brighton to work as a waitress.

That following year, I had come as close as I had ever been to despair, thinking of the dream I had given up.

3

After supper, I excused myself to Ma and went upstairs to our bedroom. I took out my mobile from my rucksack to check my messages, and saw there were four texts and a number of missed calls – all from CeCe. As promised, I had texted her when the plane had landed in Geneva, and now I sent a short reply telling her that I was fine and having an early night and that we would speak tomorrow. Switching off the phone, I slid under my duvet and lay there, listening to the silence. And I realised how rare it was for me to sleep in a room alone, in an empty house that had once been full of noisy, dynamic life. Tonight, I would not be woken by CeCe’s murmurings. I could sleep right through until morning if I wanted to.

Yet, as I closed my eyes, I did my best not to miss her.



Rising early the following morning, I threw on jeans and a hoodie, picked up the plastic wallet and tiptoed downstairs. Quietly easing open the front door of the house and taking the path to my left, I walked towards Pa Salt’s special garden,

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the plastic wallet containing his letter, my coordinates and the translated Greek inscription clutched in my hand.

Slowly, I wandered around the borders we'd planted together, checking on the progress of our progeny. In July, they came to full fruition: multi-coloured zinnias, purple asters, sweet peas gathered together like tiny butterflies, and the roses that climbed all over the arbour, shading the bench.

I realised there was only me to look after them now. Although Hans, our ancient gardener, was the 'nanny' for the plants when Pa and I were not here to care for them ourselves, I could never be sure that he loved them as we did. Stupid really, to think of plants as children. But as Pa had often said to me, the nurturing process was similar.

I stopped to admire a dearly loved plant that sported delicate purple-red flowers, suspended on fine stems above a mass of rich green leaves.

'It's called *Astrantia major*,' Pa had said, as we'd planted the tiny seeds in pots nearly two decades ago. 'Its name is thought to be derived from "*aster*", the Latin word for "star". And when it blooms, it has glorious starburst-shaped flowers. I must warn you that it is sometimes difficult to grow, especially since these seeds have travelled with me from another country and are old and dry. But if we succeed, it doesn't take much looking after, just some good soil and a little water.'

A few months later, Pa took me to a shaded corner of the garden to plant out the seedlings, which had miraculously sprouted after careful nurturing, including a spell in the refrigerator, which Pa had said was necessary to 'shock' the seeds into life.

'Now, we must be patient and hope that it likes its new home,' he'd said, as we wiped the soil from our hands.

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The *Astrantia* took another two years before it produced flowers, but since then it had happily multiplied, self-seeding in any spot in the garden that took its fancy. Looking at it now, I plucked off one of the blooms, my fingertips trailing across the fragile petals. And I missed Pa more than I could bear.

I turned and walked towards the bench nestled in the rose arbour. The wood was still covered in heavy dew and I used my sleeve to wipe it dry. I sat down, and felt as if the damp was seeping into my very soul.

I looked at the plastic wallet that held the envelopes. And I wondered now if I had made a mistake by ignoring CeCe's original plea to open our letters together.

My hands shook as I took out Pa's envelope, and, with a deep breath, tore it open. Inside was a letter, and also what looked like a small, slim jewellery box. I unfolded the letter and began to read.

*Atlantis
Lake Geneva
Switzerland*

My darling Star,

It is somehow the most fitting that I am writing to you, as we both know it is your preferred medium of communication. To this day, I treasure the long letters you wrote to me when you were away at boarding school and university. And subsequently, on your many travels to the four corners of the globe.

As you may know by now, I have tried to provide each of you with sufficient information about your

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genetic heritage. Even though I like to believe that you girls are truly mine, and as much a part of me as any naturally born child could be, there may come a day when the information I have might be of use to you. Having said that, I also accept it is not a journey all my daughters will wish to take. Especially you, my darling Star – perhaps the most sensitive and complex of all my girls.

This letter has taken the longest to compose – partly because I have written it in English, not French, and know that your use of grammar and punctuation is far superior to mine, so please forgive any mistakes I make. But also because I confess I am struggling to find a direct route to provide you with just enough information to set you on your path to discovery, yet equally, not disrupt your life if you choose not to investigate your origins further.

Interestingly, the clues I've been able to give your sisters have mostly been inanimate, yet yours will involve communication of the verbal variety, simply because the trail that leads back to your original story has been very well concealed over the years, and you will need the help of others to unravel it. I only found out the true details recently myself, but if anyone can do that, it's you, my bright Star. That quick brain of yours coupled with your understanding of human nature – studied over years of observing and, most importantly, listening – will serve you well if you decide to follow the trail.

So, I have given you an address – it's attached on a card to the back of this letter. And if you decide to visit, ask about a woman named Flora MacNichol.

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Lastly, before I close and say goodbye, I feel I must tell you that sometimes in life one has to make difficult and often heartbreaking decisions that, at the time, you may feel will hurt people you love. And they might, at least for a while. Often, however, the changes that occur from your decision will eventually be the best thing for others too. And help them move on.

My darling Star, I will not patronise you by saying any more; we both know what it is I am referring to. I have learnt over my years on this earth that nothing can stay the same forever – and expecting it to is, of course, the biggest single mistake we human beings make. Change comes whether we wish for it or not, in a host of different ways. And acceptance of this is fundamental to achieving the joy of living on this magnificent planet of ours.

Nurture not only the wonderful garden we created together, but perhaps your own elsewhere. And above all, nurture yourself. And follow your own star. It is time.

Your loving father,

Pa Salt x

I looked up at the horizon and watched the sun appear from behind a cloud across the lake, chasing the shadows away. I felt numb and even lower than before I'd opened the letter. Perhaps it was the sense of expectation that I'd felt, yet there was very little in the letter that Pa and I had not discussed when he was alive. When I had been able to look into his kind eyes and feel the gentle touch of his hand on my shoulder as we gardened together.

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I unfastened the business card that was paper-clipped to the letter and read the words printed on it.

*Arthur Morston Books
190 Kensington Church Street
London W8 4DS*

I remembered I'd once passed through Kensington on a bus. At least if I did decide to go and see Arthur Morston, I wouldn't have far to travel, like Maia had had to. I then took out the quotation that she had translated from the armillary sphere.

The oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.

I smiled, as it perfectly described CeCe and me. She: so strong and intractable, her feet firmly rooted in the ground. Me: tall but wisp-like, swayed by the slightest wind. I already knew the quote. It was from *The Prophet*, by a philosopher named Khalil Gibran. And I also knew who stood – outwardly at least – in the 'shadow' . . .

I just didn't know how to go about stepping into the sun.

After refolding it carefully, I retrieved the envelope that held the coordinates Ally had deciphered. She had written down the location they pinpointed. Out of all the clues, this was the one that frightened me most.

Did I want to know where Pa had found me?

I decided that, for now, I did not. I still wanted to belong to Pa and Atlantis.

Having replaced the envelope in the plastic wallet, I drew out the jewellery box and opened it.

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Inside lay a small black figurine of an animal, perhaps made of onyx, which sat on a slim silver base. I took it out of the box and studied it, its sleek lines clearly denoting it was feline. I looked at the base and saw there was a hallmark, and a name engraved on it.

Panther

Set into each eye socket were tiny bright amber jewels that winked at me in the weak morning sun.

‘Who owned you? And who were they to me?’ I whispered into the ether.

Replacing the panther in its box, I stood up and walked towards the armillary sphere. The last time I’d seen it, all my sisters had been crowding around it, wondering what it meant and why Pa had chosen to leave us such a legacy. I peered into the centre, and studied the golden globe and the silver bands that encased it in an elegant cage. It was exquisitely fashioned, the contours of the world’s continents standing proud in the seven seas surrounding them. I wandered around it, noting the original Greek names of all my sisters – Maia, Alcyone, Celaeno, Taygete, Electra . . . and, of course, mine: Asterope.

What’s in a name? I quoted Shakespeare’s Juliet, pondering – as I had many times in the past – whether *we* had all adopted the personas of our mythological namesakes, or whether our names had adopted *us*. In contrast to the rest of my sisters, far less seemed to be known about my counterpart’s personality. I’d sometimes wondered whether that was why I felt so invisible amongst my siblings.

Maia, the beauty; Ally, the leader; CeCe, the pragmatist;

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Tiggy, the nurturer; Electra, the fireball . . . and then me. Apparently, I was the peacemaker.

Well, if staying silent meant peace reigned, then maybe that *was* me. And perhaps, if a parent defined you from birth, then, despite who you really were, you would try to live up to that ideal. Yet there was no doubt that all my sisters fitted their mythological characteristics perfectly.

Merope . . .

My eyes suddenly fell on the seventh band and I leant in to look closer. But unlike the rest of the bands, there were no coordinates. Or a quotation. The missing sister; the seventh baby we'd all been expecting Pa Salt to bring home, but who had never arrived. Did she exist? Or had Pa felt – being the perfectionist he was – the armillary sphere and his legacy to us would not be complete without her name? Perhaps, if any of us sisters had a child, and that child was a female, we could call her 'Merope' and the seven bands would be complete.

I sat down heavily on the bench, casting my thoughts back through the years to whether Pa had ever mentioned a seventh sister to me. And as far as I could remember, he hadn't. In fact, he'd rarely talked about himself; he'd always been far more interested in what was happening in *my* life. And even though I loved him as much as any daughter could possibly love her father, and he was – apart from CeCe – the dearest person on the planet to me, I sat there with the sudden realisation that I knew almost nothing about him.

All I knew was that he had liked gardens, and had obviously been hugely wealthy. But how he'd come by that wealth was as much a mystery as the seventh band on the armillary sphere. And yet, I'd never felt for a moment as though our

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relationship was anything less than close. Or that he'd held back information from me when I had asked him something.

Perhaps I'd just never asked the right questions. Perhaps none of us sisters had.

I stood up and wandered around the garden checking on the plants and making a mental list for Hans, the gardener. I would meet him here later before I left Atlantis.

As I walked back towards the house, I realised that, after wanting to be here so desperately, I now wanted to fly back to London. And get on with my life.