

# THE PROPHECY OF BEES

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*Also by R.S. Pateman*

The Second Life of Amy Archer

THE  
PROPHECY  
OF  
BEES

R.S. Pateman



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The gun doesn't make me feel any safer.

Until a few hours ago I'd not even held a gun before, let alone loaded one. My fingers shook so much I had to concentrate to slide the bullets home. Those tremors make me even warier of the trigger. Make me doubt my aim. I'm not even sure what it is I will be shooting at. If I'll get the chance to do so. If a bullet will be of any use.

But that doesn't stop me checking to see if the gun is still beside me, propped up against the window sill. Reaching for it. There's an alarming comfort in the smooth and shiny chill of the long thin barrel. I am not reassured for long. It's a gun, after all.

I can hardly believe I'm going to have to use it. I shouldn't even be here, I always said so. If only people had listened.

But it's much too late for that now.

My mouth's so dry I can't swallow. The knot in my throat doesn't help. I can hear nothing but the thump of blood in my ears.

I stand guard at the window. It's so dark outside. Too dark even to make out the shapes of the hills and the trees that I know are there. They've been swallowed by dense and impenetrable blackness. Even the moon is hiding.

I thought I knew every type of dark there was until I came to Stagcote. It's so remote and empty that night snaps over it like a

lid. It holds in secrets. Hides demons and spells. Covers up death and disaster.

And even in daylight, those secrets linger. They've been here for centuries. In the earth. In the bricks. The air and the water.

Now they're coming to get me and Stagcote Manor's history will be repeated once again. Now I see that it deserves its nickname. Now I know why local people call it Heartbreak Hall.

Mr Eaves, the estate agent, hadn't mentioned Stagcote Manor's nickname. Not to me anyway. He might have told Mum but he probably hadn't. It's not the sort of quaint detail to make someone rush to buy the house, although, of course, that's precisely what Mum did.

She hadn't even been to see the house before she put in her offer. She didn't tell me about moving out of London either. When she called me into the drawing room at the house in Eaton Square, it wasn't to float the suggestion that a move might be good for us. It was more than an idea. It was an instruction.

She was sitting at the table by the window, her auburn hair scraped back into an immaculate bun and speared with a pearl-capped pin. Long, pale fingers collated the small stack of paper spread out in front of her. There was the glint of something in her eyes – not exactly mischief, but a smug, self-satisfaction. Like the punchline of a joke she hadn't shared yet.

The joke, as ever, was on me. She'd secured a place for me at Cheltenham Ladies' College where I was going to have to start my A levels from scratch in September.



‘You’ve missed so much of the first year,’ she sighed, ‘you haven’t a hope of catching up. Starting over’s the only way.’

I could almost picture Mum in the head’s office, squirming on the seat as she fudged some reason for me having to leave my old school. God knows I’ve given her plenty to choose from over the years but I bet she didn’t use any of those.

The truth was rather too painful. Too revealing about her. Me. *Us*. She’d probably gone for something vague and persuaded the head at my old school to back her up, should the new head check. Mum likes to cover her back. She likes to get her way too. And then she wonders where *I* get it from?

‘I’m not going to boarding school!’ I snapped.

‘You’re not boarding, Isabella. You’re a day pupil. We need the time together if we’re to build some bridges. That’s why I’ve bought Stagcote Manor.’

There it was. A done deal. No questions asked. No opinions sought. None were necessary, least of all mine. My helplessness was fuel to my fury. I had no choice. No say. My ranting got me nowhere. She just stood there with a bored look on her face, waiting for me to finish. I didn’t give her the opportunity to come back at me; I stormed out and flew up the stairs to my bedroom. I pummelled the pillows, screamed into them. It wasn’t fair. *She* wasn’t fair. I had a life too – or would have if she’d let me.

She stopped by my bedroom door a little later on and said I should get an early night as we were travelling up the next day so the head could give me the once-over and I could see the house. *As if it mattered if I liked it or not.*

Next morning, I watched her from the car as she dithered at the front door of the house. Some last-minute instructions for Olga, the housekeeper, and a quick pat and a kiss for the

chihuahua struggling to escape from Olga's arms. Olga nodded quickly and shot me a sympathetic glance; Mum had probably said something about me to her. Maybe she just felt sorry for me. She usually did.

Mum straightened out her grey linen suit, dropped the keys into her glossy black handbag and glided down the steps. Toes pointed. Shoulders straight. Eyes fixed ahead. Her smile faded when she saw me.

I hadn't even gone too mad with the make-up this time but I knew it would be too much for Mum. My eyes were pools of black, my lips a glossy aubergine. Stiff tufts of jet-black hair poked at the roof of the car.

I knew I wouldn't get away with my dirty protest but that wasn't the point. I had to make the effort. For my sake. But that's just what Mum could never get. Me looking the way I do is all about me, not her. At least it wasn't, not initially. It was about my feelings towards the world, towards myself. Inevitably it became a protest against all that Mum represented, not because I hated it per se, but because it made no space for who *I* wanted to be.

Mum opened the car door, slid into the seat. My hand was held out before she'd even opened her handbag and taken out a bottle of make-up remover and passed it to me. I'd have been more surprised if she *hadn't* been equipped and ready.

*That* was part of the problem; beating her to something, just surprising her even, pushed me on to ever more outrageous behaviour. If only she would listen to me as much as she said she loved me. If only she didn't always think she had the answer – the *only* answer to *everything*.

I took the cotton wool and lotion from Mum's hand and removed the thick black make-up with slow, belligerent strokes.

I let the balls drop into her outstretched palm and turned my head towards the window. I heard her wrap the balls in a tissue, the snap as she closed her handbag, the sigh of satisfaction.

‘Well,’ she said, starting the car, ‘I suppose I should be grateful you’ve worn something reasonably sensible.’

I looked down at the black shirt, short purple and green tartan skirt and black lace leggings.

‘I can always change. It wouldn’t take long.’

She released the handbrake and pulled off. There was a softness in her eyes as she gazed back at the house.

‘Next time we drive away from here it will be for good.’ Her accent never grated on me more than when she was trying to be sincere or wistful. It was a hybrid of Hicksville Massachusetts and Belgravia salons and spas. I may have inherited my mother’s auburn hair and green eyes, but I’d fought off her accent at all costs and hid all trace of my natural hair colour with regular doses of dye. If I looked like my mother, I thought and talked like my father and I was glad of that.

‘It’s been a good home to us, hasn’t it?’ Mum said. ‘Most of the time anyway.’

The good times she was referring to were the cocktail parties, the soirées and receptions with her pals from the opera, ballet and various charities. The bad times were pretty much everything to do with me. And losing Dad. That was another reason why I wanted to stay. Eaton Square was the only real home I’d ever known and it was the last place I’d seen Dad alive.

‘If it’s been that good a home then why are we leaving?’ I said. My tone was hopeful, conciliatory. Persuasive.

Mum looked over at me. Apologetic but resolved.

‘You know why, honey,’ she said. ‘You need a change of scene. A fresh start. Somewhere you won’t be tempted or distracted from what’s important.’

‘A prison, you mean.’

‘Not at all. Just somewhere ... out of harm’s way.’

I closed my eyes as she bumbled on about colour schemes and soft furnishings, landscaping the garden, recruiting staff, how London traffic was becoming intolerable, how nice it would be to live in air unpolluted by fumes and police sirens. All the things I would miss.

Cosmo too, of course. Cosmo more than anything. The wing mirror was crowded with cars and buses, people darting between them. I hoped to catch a glimpse of Cosmo among them, as if he might have somehow found out I was leaving London and was going to leap in front of the car, arms out, beseeching and tearful. Wanting me back. But this wasn’t some dozy romcom.

It had seemed so at the start. That shy glance he’d given me as he passed me a flyer for a gig his band was playing. That look he’d shot me from the stage, his crooked smile all the more dazzling for the spotlights. And after he’d played his set, the smell of Pernod on his breath, the gloss of blackcurrant on his lips. The quiet way he’d asked for my mobile number, his insistence that he’d use it. My delight that he had. Beginnings. If only they didn’t have to end.

I nibbled at the soft, red skin around my fingernails. Tasted blood.

‘It’s a fresh start for both of us,’ Mum said brightly. ‘We’ve got to really try and make this work. I need you to meet me halfway.’

She didn't need that at all. Her idea of halfway was her way. We both knew that – it was the pretence of there being room for negotiation that maddened me and made me fight back. Play dirty if I had to.

The school was pretty much what I expected. Lush playing fields and ivy-clad buildings, the arched windows like a cathedral. Groups of freshly pressed, make-up-free girls with clear-skinned smiles walked along the pavement, giggling and texting. They were sure to be every bit as good with hockey sticks as they were with violins, Shakespeare, Pythagoras, Palmerston and potassium. No different to the girls at the other schools I'd been to. I hadn't fitted in there either. The familiarity of it all – the predictability – was deadening.

The headmistress was a small, bony woman with sharp blue eyes and a clipped way of talking. The sort who thought she'd be able to keep me in line. We would see.

She leafed through a file on her desk, said that the reports from my previous teachers were consistent.

'You have real academic promise, especially with regard to English, it seems. We'll do all we can here to help you realise it, Isabella, as long as you make the effort too.' She tilted her head sympathetically. 'With your cooperation, your history will be just that – a thing of the past.'

Mum beamed. I ached.

An hour later we were on our way to meet Mr Eaves at Stagcote Manor. The black glossy railings of the houses in Cheltenham gave way to thick hedgerows that snaked across endless fields, their umpteen shades of green occasionally interrupted by a splash of acid yellow.

The roads got narrower, bumpier.

‘We’ll have to get another car,’ Mum said. ‘Range Rover or something like it.’

‘We could always get another house,’ I said.

‘Come on, honey. You haven’t even seen it yet! Give it a chance.’

‘I’ve seen enough. It’s in the middle of nowhere. Look!’ I pointed out of the window. ‘There’s nothing here. God, with the school and now this ... I’m going to go mad.’

Mum glared at me.

‘We agreed we’d give it a go.’

My laugh was short and bitter.

‘I didn’t agree to anything. *I* had no choice.’

‘Neither did I,’ she said. ‘*You* didn’t give me one.’

The events that brought us here had begun long ago, each one a painful step further along the drive to Stagcote Manor. It was my confusion, my anger, my gut-wrenching loss that had sent me into free fall. Stagcote was no soft landing place. No feather bed. Mum may have thought she was cushioning the blows but all she was doing was smothering me.

She put her foot down and the car bucked and dipped along the road. The satnav bleeped with confusion as we bumped our way along the track and crested a hill.

‘That must be it,’ Mum said, stopping the car and waving her hand into the distance.

The cluster of grey-beige cottages at the foot of the hill were like prey trapped beneath a heavy paw.

‘How pretty!’ Mum said, leaning forward then turning to me. The green of her eyes glittered with excitement. ‘Isn’t it, honey?’

She took my silence as approval and drove on.

As we drew closer, we turned off the track, into a long driveway. She slowed down at the house on the junction. Its brickwork was a mellow gold, the garden large but a little wild.

‘Is this it?’ I said. I couldn’t believe that it would be. It was too much like an ordinary house. Not enough of a statement.

Mum laughed and pointed to a sign on the wall. *Gate House*.

‘Our neighbours,’ she said. ‘The house isn’t part of the manor’s estate although I seem to remember the estate agent’s catalogue saying that it had been. At some point.’ She craned her neck as we drove past. ‘Pretty little place, isn’t it?’

We drove on for a half a mile, the line of tall straight trees freckling the driveway with shade and sunlight. About a hundred metres ahead of us, something moved. Mum slowed down and leant forward, frowning.

A group of people walked towards us, at the front a couple of young girls dressed in white and carrying a large garland of white flowers. Behind them was a white-smocked vicar with an open book in his hands, followed by around thirty men and women and a handful of children. Above the indistinct words of the vicar came the cry of a baby and the bark of the dog at the back of the procession.

They stopped walking and the smaller boys in the party stepped forward, towards the drystone wall on the right of the drive. The vicar laid the book upon their heads then pushed them until their foreheads gently touched the wall. When they withdrew, a man with a bucket and a brush freshened up the white paint on one of the stones in the wall.

Everyone turned and moved along the driveway, towards our car. The girls at the front slowed but the vicar waved them along. When they drew level with us, Mum opened the car window.

‘Good morning!’ she said. ‘This looks interesting. What’s going on?’

The girls blushed and shifted on their feet. The vicar walked up to the car and closed the book – the Bible – holding his place with his finger.

‘Good morning,’ he said, bowing his head. He was a tall, gaunt man and the thin gauze of white hair barely masked the pink of his scalp or its liver spots. His eyes were an intense blue. ‘I’m Father Wright. From St James’s Church in Stagcote.’ He bent down even further. Almost bowing. ‘And you, if I’m not mistaken, must be Lady Lindy Griffin-Clark.’ He glanced at me. ‘And Isabella. The new owners of the manor.’

Mum blinked, obviously delighted.

‘How clever of you to know!’ she said.

Father Wright shrugged.

‘Ah, well, I can’t claim to be clairvoyant,’ he said. ‘Stagcote is a very small village and news travels fast. Especially big news like a new resident of the manor. It’s been some time since it’s been occupied, you see.’

‘So I understand from Mr Eaves,’ Mum said.

Father Wright nodded then jerked his head down the driveway, in the direction of the manor.

‘We saw him earlier, on our way past. He told us you were coming today.’

Mum smiled.

‘Wow, and you’re the welcoming committee!’ she said.

Father Wright winced. The others in the ground moved their feet, mumbled.

‘Not quite,’ the vicar said, ‘although we’re happy to be that as well, of course ...’ He looked awkward. ‘It’s Rogationtide, you see, so we *had* to be here today, although we’d hoped to be



away before you arrived. Ordinarily, we'd have asked permission, of course.'

Mum turned to me, puzzled.

'Don't look at me,' I said. 'I can't help you. Should have done your homework before you dragged us here.'

The villagers were pretty much what I'd expected. Drab, slow, all with the same expression; bewildered or awed at the incursion of the real world. No doubt Mum would just see it as contentment. I wondered if this was everyone from the village as there was no one near my age, no teenagers at all, it seemed – at least, none the right side of fourteen.

I wasn't ready for another boyfriend – it was too soon after Cosmo and anyway, he might still come for me – but teaming up with a girl could have passed the time even if she wasn't into my sort of music and clothes. It might have been fun to lead a country bumpkin astray. To be the snake in the garden of Eden. But even that little pleasure had been denied to me. If I were to have any friends of my own age, I'd have to find them among the dowdy swots at school. My world was suddenly even smaller and dimmer.

Mum turned back to the vicar.

'Rogationtide?' she said. 'Permission? For what? Sorry. I don't understand.'

'To come through the grounds of the manor, of course.' He cringed slightly. 'Technically, we're trespassing but, as there wasn't anybody to ask, we just went ahead. We have to come this way, you see, when we're beating the bounds.'

Mum sat up, her back stiffened.

'You're beating your hounds?' she said, indignantly.

'Not hounds, Your Ladyship,' Father Wright said. '*Bounds*. The village boundaries.'

‘Oh, right.’ Mum’s body relaxed.

‘It’s something we do each year,’ Father Wright said. ‘Something Stagcote has done since ... well, for ever.’

‘How fascinating!’ Mum said, lowering the window further. ‘What does it actually involve?’

Father Wright smiled again.

‘I can tell from your accent that you’re not from this part of the world,’ he said.

Mum nodded.

‘Boston, Massachusetts.’ She said it like she deserved a prize. ‘But I’ve lived here for twenty-five years.’ She said that like she deserved a prize too.

‘Then you’ll be aware that the British have some funny ways,’ Father Wright said.

‘Amen to that,’ Mum said. ‘Driving on the left still makes no sense to me.’

Father Wright nodded patiently.

‘This little ceremony is one of our ways,’ he said. ‘Well, in places like Stagcote at least.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes, each year we process around the parish and mark its boundaries by repainting the posts or the stones that mark it.’

‘And we get our heads bashed!’ a little boy in the crowd said.

‘Hardly bashed,’ Father Wright said, laughing. ‘We “hit” the children’s heads against the posts so that they remember where the boundaries are. They need to know the limits.’

‘Amen to that too,’ Mum said, glancing at me. ‘And what do *you* do?’ she said to the girls with the flowers.

They put their heads down and fiddled with the garland.

‘Look pretty,’ one of them mumbled.

The other girl nudged her.

‘We make the flowers and the crops grow,’ she said.

‘Fertility and renewal and remembrance,’ Father Wright said, ‘that’s what it’s all about.’

‘It’s charming, isn’t it, honey?’ Mum said.

It was all I could do not to laugh. Trooping round the countryside with the Bible and flowers and a pot of paint? Knocking kids’ heads against walls because they were too stupid to remember where they lived? They didn’t need permission. They needed help.

I did too. If this was what passed for fun in Stagcote, then there was no telling what other horrors lay in store for me. Communal jam-making maybe. Morris dancing. Basket weaving. Oh God.

‘So you don’t mind us being here, then?’ Father Wright said.

‘Not at all!’ Mum waved her hand away. ‘If it’s been going on for all this time, who am I to stop it?’

‘You’re the lady of the manor,’ one of the little girls said, sulkily. ‘You can do what you want.’

There was a murmur among the rest of the group. It was hard to tell if they were agreeing or not.

‘Well,’ Mum said, ‘I don’t know about that.’

‘I do,’ I muttered.

Mum shot me a stern look then turned back to Father Wright.

‘We’d best not keep Mr Eaves waiting,’ she said.

Father Wright bowed again.

‘I’m sure we’ll see you again soon,’ he said. ‘Hopefully at the church?’

Church? As if.

Mum nodded, took off the handbrake and drove on.

‘How about that? Beating the bounds. Who knew?’ she said, chuckling. ‘Wasn’t it the cutest thing? Those little girls were adorable.’

There was a faraway look in her eyes and I knew she was thinking about me when I was the same age. I was too.

Then I was the sweet little girl with the auburn ponytail, bright green eyes, ready smile and immaculate manners. I liked nothing more than spreading out my clothes next to Barbie’s on the bed, Barbie and I advising each other what to wear and then asking Mum to settle any disputes.

And I was still riding at that age too. I’d go out every day with Mum around Hyde Park, my grey pony, Shenandoah, ambling alongside Mum’s grey mare, Fleur. Apart from the size of the horses we were mirror images; backs straight, hair in nets beneath jet-black hats, our leather boots and saddles squeaking a duet.

By the time I outgrew Shenandoah, I’d outgrown aping Mum, too. I declined the offer of another, bigger horse and haven’t ridden since, despite Mum’s efforts to persuade me.

As we drove along the driveway, Mum glanced over.

‘I bet there are some wonderful rides around here, don’t you, honey?’

I was sure there were. I was equally sure that she’d be riding out alone. But there was just a part of me – the smallest, tiniest part, too small to be given any credence – that wondered if I still knew how to ride. If there’d still be a thrill in it. What it might be like to ride alongside her once again.

The thought disturbed me. Made me wonder if the move to Stagcote was going to have the miraculous effect on our relationship that Mum had hoped for. I shut the thought away.

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From the moment Mum first told me that she'd bought Stagcote Manor, I was determined to hate it. It could have been the most beautiful house in the world and it would have made no difference.

What it represented was ugly. So it seemed only right that the house turned out to be ugly too.

A hotchpotch of architectural styles, it slumbered at the bottom of the hill, as dark and quiet as the shadows it cast across the lawns.

The sleek symmetry of Georgian windows and balsacoloured stone was disrupted by sludge-grey towers crimped by crenellations and crowded by a huge, stopped clock and a rusty bell. Ballustraded balconies hung over bricked-up doorways, a strip of driveway lapping at each one, like a tide.

Despite my best efforts, I couldn't deny the flutter in my heart. It was a mess of a house, unruly and unkempt, twisted and restless, as if at war with itself. The manor's turrets, towers and wonky, ivy-clad walls created my very own Gothic castle.

Cosmo would have loved it. I bit my lip at the thought of him, of knowing he would never see it or be part of my life here. Of knowing he would never want to be. That was as good a reason to hate the manor as anything else.

Mum exhaled deeply.

'There it is,' she said. 'Home.'

I couldn't tell from her tone if she was pleased with the house or not. I watched her carefully for any sign of disappointment or uncertainty. If it wasn't what she was expecting, she might change her mind about the move and we could stay in London. But her face glowed with a quiet fire that couldn't be faked, although her experiences with me had given

her the knack of putting a high gloss on things for appearance's sake.

Even if she hated the house there was no way she would let me know. And she certainly wouldn't even think about selling it. That would be giving up at the first obstacle. Giving in to me.

Besides, the appearance of the house was incidental. I'd seen a lot of property shows on television when I was taking a break from pretending to do some homework. All they banged on about was location, location, location. And that's what mattered with Mum. The manor was miles from anywhere, removed from all distractions but within driving distance of a good school, so it ticked all the right boxes.

As we pulled into the forecourt, the front door opened and a man came out, buttoning up the jacket of his blue suit. A horseshoe of brown hair exposed the ruddy brown of his scalp. When we got out of the car, his smile was quick and slick. His handshake was too.

'Welcome to Stagcote Manor, Your Ladyship,' he said, standing back, arm out like a chat-show host introducing a guest. 'Or should I say welcome home.'

Mum gave him her most gracious smile, turned to full beam.

'You're the second welcoming party we've had today,' she said.

Eaves frowned for a moment, then raised a finger in understanding.

'Ah, the vicar and his troop.' His frown was back. 'I hope you didn't mind, Lady Lindy. I would have asked you first but—'

Mum waved him away.

‘It’s not like it’s going to be happening every day of the week, is it?’ Now it was her turn to frown. ‘Or is it? How often does ... Rogationtide come along anyway? Didn’t the vicar say once a year, honey?’

I shrugged.

‘I believe so,’ Eaves said, with a deferential nod. ‘Now, if you’d like to look around on your own I can wait in my car.’

‘Nonsense,’ Mum said. ‘We want the full tour.’ She shielded her eyes and leant back to look up at the house. ‘This part is eighteenth century, yes?’

Eaves nodded. Mum smiled, pleased to have got it right.

‘Mostly, yes. The bell tower is from around 1850, we believe. And of course there are parts of the house that we think go back much further than that.’ He lowered his voice. ‘If only walls could talk, Lady Lindy. I’m sure it would have some wonderful tales to tell.’

‘I bet,’ Mum said, dropping her gaze and focusing on Eaves. ‘I can almost guarantee there’ll be a few stories about ghosts.’

‘Indeed,’ he said.

‘Not that I go in for all that bunkum, of course,’ Mum said.

Eaves held his arm out in invitation.

‘After you,’ he said.

I didn’t follow on behind her. The longer I left going into the house the better. It wasn’t my new plaything, but hers. The house wasn’t going anywhere; it could wait for me as much as I could wait to see its dubious attractions. Ghosts included. At least Eaves hadn’t tried to use the ghost stories as a marketing angle. Mum was many things but gullible wasn’t one of them. At least I take after her in some ways.

‘You go on,’ I said. ‘I’ll catch you up. I want a fag.’

Mum glared at me and shook her head.

‘All this fresh, country air and you want your lungs full of that ... filth instead?’

‘I’ll take it every time,’ I said, rummaging in my bag for my tobacco.

Mum sighed. Eaves smiled weakly and took a step towards the house, eager to get away from our tiff.

She’d been on at me about smoking ever since she found a crumpled packet of Rothmans in my pencil case when I was twelve. She screamed that I was killing myself and demanded to know who’d bought them for me. I screamed back that she should never have been looking through my things anyway.

Dad said we both had a point, which only made Mum angrier and me love him all the more. I never did let on – to either of them – that it was Dad’s chauffeur who’d bought the cigarettes for me.

A year later I was able to buy my own, a growth spurt that added a couple of inches to my bust and height, belying Mum’s claims that smoking would stunt my development. A couple of inches of backcombed hair, plenty of make-up and even more attitude ensured no newsagent ever questioned my age again.

I rolled my cigarette and gazed at the manor through a cloud of smoke. Even when the wind had whipped away the smoke, the house seemed blurred, the fine lines I’d noticed from a distance somehow less distinct now that I was closer. I leant back and looked up at the towers. The hands on the clock had stopped at ten to two. A giant, rusty, V-sign. The wall was stained and streaked with ochre, like dried blood.

It could never be home.

I turned and headed away from the house, back up the driveway. An early escape bid or reconnaissance for future attempts. It was a shame there was no sign of the people in the



procession as they'd be sure to know the quickest way back to civilisation. Or maybe not.

I ended up near the Gate House. I sat down on a tree stump, took out my tobacco and papers and rolled another cigarette. As I exhaled I shifted back onto the stump, my hand flat on its rough, crumbling surface. Something stuck into me. Something sharp.

I jumped up.

'Shit!' I yelled, flapping my hand about.

I opened up my palm, saw a small splinter sticking into the skin, an angry red spot appearing around it.

'Are you OK?'

I jumped and turned, my cigarette falling to the ground.

He was coming out of the garden of the Gate House. Something about him resonated with me. The slightly uneven gait. The grey crew-cut hair. The wonky smile with perfectly straight, clinically white teeth. If he was our new neighbour then I was encouraged; he didn't look like the others I'd seen in the procession. I mean, he was still old – just not *as* old. At least he didn't look it. If he had a daughter she could be around my age. For a moment I forgot about my stinging palm.

'Hello again,' he said.

I frowned at him.

'It's Isabella, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I said hesitantly. The vicar wasn't wrong. News really *did* travel fast in Stagcote.

'How did—'

'I was in the procession earlier on,' he said.

*That's* why he'd struck a chord with me, although I didn't recall actually seeing him there. I must have caught him in my peripheral vision. Sensed him somehow.

‘I was at the back,’ he said. ‘Hiding my blushes. All a bit twee for me.’

‘And me,’ I said.

‘Howard Thompson,’ he said, putting his hand out. I winced as I shook it. ‘What happened to your hand?’ he asked.

‘The ruddy countryside, that’s what happened!’ I said, looking at my palm. ‘I’ve got a splinter.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure about that,’ he said, and walked towards me. ‘Let me see.’

He took my hand. His skin was brown, rough to the touch.

‘Just as I thought,’ he said. ‘Not a splinter. A bee sting. Hold still.’

He pinched the fine, black stem of the sting between his thumb and forefinger and quickly pulled it away, before brushing it off on his trousers.

The red and tender welt on my palm was already swollen with venom.

‘You’re not allergic to bee stings, are you?’ he said. ‘Some people are.’

‘No,’ I said, shaking my hand. ‘Ow, that hurts.’

He looked at the tree stump.

‘There’s the culprit,’ he said, flicking away the curled up bee. ‘A straggler.’

‘You can tell what sort of bee it is just by looking at it?’

He laughed. A rich, throaty chuckle.

‘God no,’ he said. ‘But there are plenty of folks around here who can. What I meant was that it must have got separated from the swarm.’

I stopped and looked around me nervously.

‘Swarm?’

He steered me through the garden gate.

‘Don’t worry, it’s all sorted now. Cedric’s on the case.’

He pointed towards the far end of the garden where a chubby man with a white beard carried a large straw basket towards a cluster of beehives, one of which had its roof open.

I looked at Cedric and then at Howard.

‘What? You’re telling me he’s got a swarm of bees in there?’

Howard nodded.

‘But ... he must be mad! He hasn’t even got one of those protective suit things on. Shouldn’t he have one of those hats on too ... you know, with the veil thingy?’

‘Cedric doesn’t use them. Or need them. Apparently, the more often you’re stung, the greater your immunity to the venom. Cedric says he’s been stung more times than he can remember. But he’s got another more miraculous weapon in his arsenal too.’ He leant in closer. ‘You’ve heard the phrase about someone being able to charm the birds from the trees?’

‘Yeah, of course.’

‘Well, Cedric’s got the measure of *all* living things. Bees included. He’s like the Pied Piper. Only he doesn’t need a flute. Just his know-how and his voice. Listen.’

It was hard to hear Cedric above the thrum of bees and the rush of wind in the leaves, but I could just make out the words in a light, mellifluous tone and a languid, comforting rhythm.

‘Come by, come by, my beauties,’ he said. ‘Here’s home now. Your new home.’

I couldn’t believe he actually thought the bees were listening to him and doing as he asked them. Like he was Doctor Doolittle or something. My laughter was easier to swallow than my scepticism.

I flinched as he tapped the end of the basket and a solid clump of bees fell into the open hive. The grass around it undulated as stragglers walked towards the hive entrance, their backs and wings glinting in the sunlight like wet coal.

Cedric placed the roof on the hive and walked towards us, stroking his beard.

‘All done,’ he said slowly. ‘For now’s, anyhow.’

I thought maybe he’d just adopted a light, sing-songy voice for the bees, but it turned out that was his normal way of talking. His accent was thick and rolled around his mouth. Father Wright’s had too, I realised. So did Howard’s, although his was less pronounced.

Cedric stopped when he saw me. His eyes swept over me with a mix of curiosity and distrust, the glare I’d grown accustomed to because of the way I dressed and made up my face.

‘Ow do,’ he said, dipping his head at me before turning to Howard and flicking his eyebrows skywards. ‘They’ll be OK, Howard. They be settling in now.’

‘Excellent,’ Howard said. ‘So they won’t be causing any more trouble for people?’ He pointed at me. ‘This young lady got stung.’

Cedric frowned.

‘You’s been unlucky then, miss. They’re normally right docile when they’re swarming, see. So filled up on honey they can’t bend their body to get the sting into you.’

I looked at my hand.

‘That’ll be right,’ I said. ‘Just my luck.’ I blew on my palm. ‘To be fair, I didn’t give it much choice. I squashed it. By accident, of course,’ I added quickly, not sure why I felt I needed to explain. It was only a bee and I hadn’t meant to do it.

‘Well, Howard here can take care of that sting for you, right enough,’ Cedric said.

Howard put a finger to his forehead and gave a quick salute.

‘I can rub your palm with some onion if you like,’ he said.

‘Onion?’ I wasn’t sure I’d heard him properly.

‘Been used for bee stings for centuries, so Cedric told me.’

‘That’s right,’ Cedric said. ‘Well-known fact, that is. Stings and onions.’

‘Well known around here anyway,’ Howard said with a sly wink. ‘And, bizarrely enough, it works. I mean, who knew?’ He jerked his head towards Cedric. ‘Apart from Cedric and the rest of Stagcote, that is.’

‘Have you got any onion?’ Cedric asked.

Howard said he had.

‘Aye, well,’ Cedric said, shaking his head, ‘that’s the sting taken care of. The little one, anyways. The big sting though ...’ He sucked in his breath and shook his head again. ‘Not an onion in the world can do much against that.’

‘Big one?’ I said.

Howard laughed and put his hand on Cedric’s shoulder.

‘He’s got this notion that there’s trouble ahead,’ he said.

‘Ain’t no notion about it.’ Cedric’s eyes flashed with anger. ‘It’s the truth. You mark my words. The bees know.’

I wanted to laugh. No one in their right mind could believe that bees knew much about anything other than flowers and honey and stuff they were meant to know. Bee stuff. But *he* did. I wondered if he was Stagcote’s village idiot; that would explain why Howard humoured him. I followed suit.

‘The bees know what?’ I asked, with as much interest and innocence I could muster.

Howard held out his arm, inviting Cedric to speak.

‘The prophecy of bees.’ Cedric’s voice was low and grave. ‘When a swarm is found on a dead tree, it’s a warning that death is nearby.’ He pointed vaguely over his shoulder. ‘We found this swarm earlier. During the procession. On a dead elder tree. *Inside* the parish boundary.’ He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and shook his head. ‘Not good, miss. Someone in this parish is not long for this world.’

I nearly said I hoped it was my departure from Stagcote the bees were referring to, but he looked so serious and intent I didn’t dare. I hoped the bees were right though; I couldn’t stand the idea of living in a world where banging kids’ heads against stone walls was considered normal and the stings of clairvoyant bees were treated with vegetables.

‘All the other villagers are just as perturbed,’ Howard said to me, hunching his shoulders, as if he too was struggling not to laugh. ‘There was such a fuss when we found it this morning you’d have thought a siren had gone off, warning of an imminent nuclear attack.’

‘It’s no laughing matter,’ Cedric said sharply. ‘Nothing to laugh at, at all.’

Howard grimaced.

‘Sorry, I shouldn’t mock you.’

‘No,’ Cedric said. ‘No you shouldn’t. Nor the bees neither. They’s deserve respect. They’s know things – loooooong before they happens.’

‘Well,’ Howard said, ‘let’s hope they’ve got it wrong on this occasion, eh?’

‘Hope?’ Cedric snorted. ‘You can hope all you like. Now the bees are safely home, I’m off to the church to pray. I won’t be the only one there neither, you watch. You’d do right to follow suit too,’ he said to Howard. ‘And you, miss, especially as

you're living at Heartbreak Hall. Some would say *you* need prayers more than most.'

'Heartbreak Hall?' I repeated.

'It's what the locals call the manor,' Howard explained.

'For good reason too,' Cedric said. 'Nothing good ever happens up there.'

He wouldn't let his eyes meet mine.

'It's supposed to be cursed, would you believe?' Howard said, arching his eyebrows.

'Yeah right,' I said, smiling. 'Nice try.'

'What?' Howard said.

'Winding me up! Look, I might be young *and* the new kid in town, but I'm not ditzy enough to believe in curses and whatever.'

'It's the truth,' Cedric said.

'Sure, about as real as the bees doing what you tell them.'

Cedric glared at me.

'It's all true, I tell you. All of it.'

He looked crestfallen. Hurt. He was an old man. A little simple. I had to humour him.

'What sort of curse is it then?' I said. 'What's meant to happen?'

But Cedric must have sensed my insincerity and just muttered to himself and started to wander away.

'I've said too much as it is,' he said when I pressed him. 'I'd best be off to the church.' He dipped his head at me and walked quickly to the garden gate.

'Right,' Howard said, turning to me. 'Let's get this sting taken care of, shall we?'

‘There’s no need, really.’ I checked my hand. The red lump in the middle of my palm was larger and darker now. I winced when I touched it with my fingertip, felt the warm throb of pain.

‘I know it sounds daft but it *will* help,’ Howard said. ‘It won’t take a minute.’

I’d already upset one of the villagers and I hadn’t even moved in yet. I didn’t want to upset our nearest neighbour as well, especially as he seemed to find old Cedric’s ways eccentric too. If everyone in Stagcote was as wacky as Cedric, then Howard might be as close to normal as I could hope for.

I followed him through the back door of the Gate House, into the kitchen. He pointed to the old wooden table and chairs at the far end and told me to take a seat. I walked through a pool of heat emitted by the blood-red Aga. Howard took an onion from the vegetable rack next to the sink and a knife from the collection sprouting like wigwam poles from the cutlery drainer.

‘So,’ he said, as he rested the onion on the sideboard and pressed down on the knife, ‘what do you make of the manor? Can you see yourself living there?’

I laughed cynically.

‘No. But Mum’s really set on it. Not even a curse is gonna shift her.’

The onion split into two. He turned over one of the halves and sliced it; thin opaque waves fell slowly onto the counter.

‘Ah,’ he said, picking up a slice and passing it to me. ‘What about your father?’

‘Dad’s ... Dad died a few years ago.’ I winced as the cold of the onion touched the heat of the sting.

‘Just leave it there,’ Howard said softly. ‘Let it do whatever it is it does.’



The tone of his voice was as soothing as the balm of the onion. I was suddenly four years old again, sitting on a dazzlingly white beach as Dad gave the kiss of life to Barbie after she'd been swept into the sea by a wave.

I looked around the kitchen. Mismatched wooden furniture. Country-coloured pottery vases. Cast-iron cookware on a scratched slate shelf. Hessian place mats. The Aga was the only thing with a definite colour, as red and glossy as it was warm.

'My dad passed away a few years ago too,' he said, as he put the kettle onto the Aga's hotplate. 'It's kind of what brought me here.'

'So you're not from Stagcote then?' I nodded. 'Thought so.'

'Bristol,' he said. 'Originally. I ended up here via Exeter University, London and Frankfurt.' He gazed off into the distance. Then sighed. 'That's where I was when Dad died.' He pulled a face. 'I was working in banking. Married. Disillusioned. Classic mid-life crisis I guess. I took early retirement and Ulle, my wife, came back to the UK with me. We thought we'd make a go of it in the country, but ...' He shook his head. 'I've not had the energy to move on.' The smile was back on his face. 'But then, my house isn't cursed, is it? Maybe if it was I'd be out of here a bit sharpish.'

He took two mugs from the draining board and added a heaped spoon of coffee from the jar on the windowsill.

I smiled and shook my head.

'Is it for real, all this stuff? Obedient bees and curses, I mean. It's like the land that time forgot around here.'

'It's real enough to Cedric.'

'What about the rest of them? You said they use onions on stings too so they must be just as weird.'

He poured in water from the kettle. Steam wreathed around him.

‘People can’t help what they believe.’

I bit my lip and shook my head.

‘But it’s ludicrous, isn’t it?’

The teaspoon clattered against the mug as Howard stirred the coffee.

‘People believe in more ludicrous things. God, for one. An invisible, all-knowing spirit who lives in the sky? Really?’

‘That’s different ... and anyway, I don’t believe in God.’ I took the mug from Howard. ‘What’s supposed to happen with this so called curse then?’ I said.

‘No idea. I’m not privy to stuff like that, being the incomer I am. Two years I’ve been here and they still won’t let me in on it. That should tell you all you need to know about Stagcote and the people who live here. I only got to join in with the beating the bounds jamboree as they couldn’t really leave me out, seeing as it comes by my house.’

I sipped my coffee slowly.

‘Of course, it might be different for you,’ he said, blowing on his coffee. ‘You’re from the manor. The lady of the manor – sort of. Maybe that will make them open up more.’

I put the mug down and lifted up the slice of onion; the bump of the sting was less pronounced, the redness slightly paler. I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

‘Told you it would work,’ Howard said. ‘These people know a thing or two.’

The phone in my pocket vibrated.

Voicemail. Mum.

‘Isabella? Where on earth are you? I hope you haven’t run off ... you really need to give the manor a chance. It’s got so

much potential, honey. I just know we'll be really happy here. Come back and have a good look around. See for yourself.'

I deleted the message and dangled the phone between my fingers.

'I'd better be going.'

'Well, I guess I'll be seeing you again soon, now that we're neighbours.' He clicked his fingers. 'Which reminds me ...'

He opened one of the cupboards and took out a jar filled with a dark amber honey. 'Thank you,' he said, and passed it to me.

'What are you thanking me for?'

'Cedric told me it's customary for the beekeeper to give a jar of honey to his neighbour, as a thank you for letting the bees feed on the plants in their garden.'

I rolled the jar in my uninjured hand.

'Thanks, but to be honest I don't really like honey.' I put my hand to my mouth. 'But don't tell the bees that, will you?'

Howard laughed and beckoned me outside.

'One more thing,' he said. 'Come on.'

I followed him down to the bottom of the garden. The air hummed with the wings of thousands of bees; the ground trembled with bass.

'Not too close,' Howard said. 'And don't make any sudden movements or loud noise.'

My mouth was dry, my heart thumping. There was something unsettling about being so close to something so natural and vital. Something so potentially dangerous.

Howard knelt down slowly and beckoned me to do the same. I checked to see there were no bees on the grass and knelt down next to him.

'What are you doing?' I said.

‘Sssh,’ he said, his finger to his lips. ‘We’ve got to tell the bees the news.’

‘What? You expect me to talk to the bees?’ I said, incredulous.

‘They need to be told whenever big stuff happens around here. Weddings, deaths, births. That sort of thing.’

‘What, they’re going to send a condolence card, are they? Or a helium balloon?’ I said, starting to stand up. The touch from Howard’s hand on my arm stopped me halfway. That and the buzz of the bees.

‘You don’t believe in all this, surely?’ I said, lowering my voice.

‘No, but we have to do it. Out of courtesy.’

‘But they’re bees, for God’s sake!’

‘Not just courtesy to them, but to Cedric. They’re *his* bees. He can’t keep them in his garden as his neighbours have got dogs and young children. So he keeps them up here, out of the way. If we don’t tell them your news, they’ll stop producing honey for him.’

‘But that’s mental!’ I said, tossing my head back and laughing.

The bees buzzed a little louder.

‘Sssh,’ Howard whispered. ‘I told you to keep still and quiet.’

The zip of black bodies in the air stirred up a flutter of fear inside me. It was nonsense. Talking to bees. Mysterious curses. It almost made Mum seem sane. I just wanted to get away.

‘What do we do?’

‘Just tell them your name and who you are,’ Howard said.

‘You’re joking me,’ I said.

‘Just say it. Come on. For Cedric’s sake.’

‘I’m Isabella,’ I said, in a poor copy of Cedric’s singsong voice. ‘But you ...’ I pointed at the hives with a single finger, ‘you can call me Izzy.’

Howard glared at me.

‘My name’s Izzy,’ I said, enunciating clearly. ‘And I live at Stagcote Manor.’

The thrum of the hive intensified.