



Chapter 1

Birthdays

It was a real downer having a birthday so close to the beginning of term, thought Matt, as he did every year. It should feel special, turning seventeen, legally able to drive a car, but starting his first year in the sixth form and being nearly a year older than some of his mates made him feel stupid, as if he had been made to retake a year. Matt was used to feeling stupid but that didn't mean he liked it.

It didn't help that his younger brother, Harry, was June-born and top of the class in every subject. But then Harry wasn't dyslexic. He was just a normal, rather bright kid.

'Being dyslexic doesn't mean you aren't clever.' That was a mantra Matt had been hearing ever since his problems had been discovered in primary school. His

mother said it, his father said it and every ed psych he'd ever seen told him the same thing. He'd often wondered whether he should have it tattooed across his forehead or printed on a T-shirt. Whether that would help him believe it.

'Here you are,' said his mother, beaming as she slid a hot plate of bacon, egg, tomato and fried bread in front of him. 'Special birthday breakfast.'

'What about me?' complained Harry, but his own plate arrived before he could get into his stride.

'And me?' asked their dad, up unusually early and already waving his knife and fork as his wife produced his with a flourish.

'Anyone would think it was their birthdays too,' mumbled Matt through a mouthful of fried bread.

'Aah, diddums, would you like an extra tomato?' asked his mum. She wasn't having a cooked breakfast herself and she didn't usually wait on the rest of them, so that did make it special, even though she had chivvied the boys out of bed half an hour earlier than usual so they could eat a big breakfast before school.

Matt's mother contemplated her family with satisfaction. It was no mean feat to have raised two teenage boys in London without their ever having got into any trouble. Harry was doing really well at school and Matt was coping well with his dyslexia. Her husband Andy was smiling at her over his fried breakfast, his brown hair flopping into his eyes as it had when she had first met him twenty-two years ago. Jan noticed with a small pang that it was beginning to go grey.

'Don't eat a big lunch,' she told the boys. 'Remem-

ber we're going to the Golden Dragon tonight.'

But it was an unnecessary caution. Her sons could eat all day and still put away vast quantities of dinner.



On the morning of Arianna's eighteenth birthday, Luciano was missing her just as much as she might have wished. He had arranged for Rodolfo to give her a small package from him, containing the earrings he had chosen himself from the ducal silversmith, but it wasn't the same as seeing her eyes sparkle when she opened it.

He rode from Silvia's house near the many-domed basilica to the university building where he was due for a class in Rhetoric. He had to smile as he thought of it. If he had stayed in his old world, he might have studied Music or History. And when Rodolfo had first suggested sending him to study in Padavia, they talked about Alchemy and other subjects that might help a Stravagante to practise what Rodolfo called Science, though Luciano still thought of it as Magic.

But once he had asked Arianna to marry him, everything had changed.

'You must have the education of a proper nobleman,' Rodolfo had declared and, surprisingly, Luciano's foster-father, Doctor Dethridge, had agreed.

'Rhetoricke, Grammar, Logicke,' the old Elizabethan had said. 'Thatte wiche we calle the Three-folde Waye will give ye a good grounding in al ye neede to knowe.'

Luciano wondered what his real dad would have said about those as a set of A level subjects!

‘Grammar?’ he queried. ‘You mean like nouns and verbs? I think I know that already.’ He remembered his Head of English at Barnsbury Comprehensive School, Mrs Wood, who had been a great stickler for grammar.

To his surprise, Rodolfo and William Dethridge had both burst out laughing.

‘Harken to the ladde,’ said Dethridge. ‘Ye might as well saye thatte since ye knowe whatte a bricke be, ye canne build an house!’

‘I don’t know what Grammar means in your twenty-first century England, Luciano,’ said Rodolfo, ‘but at university here in Talia it includes the study of History, Poetry, all kinds of literature. Including reading it aloud.’

Luciano had a vision of himself standing up with his hands behind his back, reciting a poem he had learned by heart. It was his turn to laugh.

‘I see it doesn’t daunt you,’ said Rodolfo, clapping him on the shoulder. ‘We shall make you a complete sixteenth-century Talian nobleman, able to take his place beside any duke or prince in the land.’

Even a grand duke? thought Luciano to himself. He could never forget that he had made a powerful enemy of Fabrizio di Chimici. But he was content to do what his foster-father and his mentor wanted. He trusted them with his life. And he was secretly a bit relieved not to have to study Science, since he hadn’t been very good at it in his old life.

He turned his horse up the street of the Saint towards his first class of the day, which was in the Palazzo del Montone, the building of the ram. Professor Constantin would be waiting.



‘There’s the postman,’ said Jan as the rest of the family finished their breakfast. Matt jumped up from the table and fetched in a handful of cards and letters.

‘No parcels?’ asked Harry.

‘Doesn’t look like it,’ said Matt, tearing open the biggest card. ‘But, here’s a huge cheque from grandma and grandpa. My kind of present.’

‘They want you to put it towards your driving lessons,’ said his father.

‘What driving lessons would they be?’ asked Matt innocently but he could see from his parents’ faces that he was right about what they were giving him.

‘All will be revealed at the sign of the Golden Dragon,’ said his mother. ‘But now you’d better get a move on. No, wait, you’ve missed one.’

There was one unopened white envelope in Matt’s place, which he snatched up. ‘I’ll open it later,’ he said. ‘I have to hurry now.’

But he was in no hurry to open that card; he’d recognised the writing and he knew who it was from and what it was. His great-aunt Eva, his mother’s aunt, sent him the same present every year: a twenty-pound book token.

It was a sore subject. Eva was a nice woman in her seventies, a bit vague but very loving. Jan’s parents had both died young so Auntie Eva was the closest thing Matt had to a grandparent on his mother’s side.

Eva lived alone in a big flat in Brighton and Matt had loved going there when he was little. He felt guilty now about how long it had been since he’d visited his

great-aunt. She had always plied him and Harry with specially made meals and cakes but there was this great big rift between them: she assumed he was as much of a reader as she was.

Eva's flat was packed with books, arranged double on the bookshelves that lined every room – even the loo – and stacked in dangerous heaps up the sides of the stairs. New books came all the time, as Eva had taught English Literature at Sussex and still reviewed titles for several journals now she was retired. She had been told that Matt was dyslexic, of course, and even seemed sympathetic, but the information somehow just didn't stick in her head; like a lot of things she didn't want to remember, Jan said. And every birthday along rolled the generous book token.

Sometimes Jan gave Matt money for it, since she was always buying books herself, or she used to go with him to a shop and choose kids' books she thought he could manage. But that would have just been embarrassing now. He just shoved Eva's card into his duffel bag as he pulled his jacket on and then ran towards school. He didn't want to be late. It was bad news having a mother who taught at your school; it meant nothing you did wrong ever went unnoticed.

His girlfriend, Ayesha, was waiting for him at the gate and they just had time to snatch a kiss, to the delight of a few whooping Year 8 stragglers, before running in for registration. 'Happy birthday,' said Ayesha. 'See you at break.'

Matt felt really happy for the first time that day. He had to kick himself regularly to believe that Ayesha, the most gorgeous and the brightest girl in his year, liked *him*, Matt, the big stupid lunk. She had glossy

black hair and eyes that looked as if she had been born with mascara and liner already applied. And, unlike him, she knew exactly what she was going to do about university next year. Go to Cambridge and become a high-flying lawyer. According to Matt's dad, she would probably end up as Attorney General, or at least a High Court judge.

Ayesha knew about Matt's dyslexia and, unlike Great-Aunt Eva, understood it. She said it didn't make any difference, that he was clever anyway and gorgeous with it. Matt didn't see it himself. When he looked in the mirror, he saw someone built like his dad, like a rugby forward, which is what he was. Matt, that is. Andy Wood had given up rugger years ago and put on quite a few pounds since. He was now a professional singer in the chorus at the opera house and couldn't risk any injury to his throat or chest.

It would have been even more embarrassing to have a parent who was an opera singer than one who was a teacher in your school, if Andy Wood had looked anything like that sounded. But anyone less ethereal and arty than Matt's father would have been hard to find. Six foot three and broad with it, with a full beard when he didn't have to shave it off for particular operas, Andy looked much more like a navvy than a singer, and only Matt's closest friends knew what he did for a living.

But his musical talent had passed Matt by. Harry was different; he played trumpet in the school orchestra and sang tenor in the school choir. Music came as naturally to Harry as sport did to Matt.

At breaktime, Matt went to the sixth-form centre, where several kettles were already boiling and mugs

lined up for coffee and hot chocolate.

‘Look at all that steam,’ said an upper-sixth girl with red, black and white striped hair. ‘We’re probably contributing more to global warming at Barnsbury Comp than – I don’t know . . .’

‘A field of farting cows?’ suggested a tall honey-coloured boy with dreadlocks.

A fair girl at his side giggled.

‘It’s true,’ said the boy with dreads. ‘The methane gas produced by all the cows in the world is causing more global warming than transatlantic flights.’

Matt knew this upper-sixth boy by sight and was sure he was doing Arts rather than Sciences, but the two girls were listening to him as if he were Al Gore.

‘Well, I think we should get the school to buy us an urn,’ said the stripey-haired girl. ‘Then there would be only one lot of boiling water and one lot of energy.’

Ayesha came in then with a large fridge box under her arm. ‘Birthday present, part one,’ she said, opening the box. A wonderful waft of freshly-baked chocolate cake rose from it.

‘Brownies!’ said Matt and suddenly he became very popular indeed.



The Palazzo del Montone had once been an inn, with a ram’s skull hung outside it to proclaim its name. But it was unusually big for an inn and, not so unusually, very popular with students in the city. So, as the University got itself established, more and more teachers drifted towards giving informal lessons there. That was more than a hundred years ago and the city

had long since bought the inn and all the buildings in its block and turned them into the main part of the University. But it was still known informally as the Ram.

It made Luciano feel at home, remembering the time he had spent in the Twelfth of the Ram in Remora. And a winged ram was the emblem of his new home city of Bellezza. These days the university building had a sculpture of a ram's head outside with magnificently curled stone horns. Luciano ran up the stairs in the colonnaded great court two at a time but it was all right; Professor Constantin had not started his lecture.

The Professor was standing, talking to a couple of other students, and Luciano took time to look at him. He was totally unlike any other Stravagante he had met. No one would mistake him for anything other than he was supposed to be, a middle-aged university professor, with a neat grey beard. But Rodolfo had said that Constantin was one of their number, a powerful natural philosopher who had travelled to Luciano's own world.

Rhetoric wasn't as dry a subject as Luciano had feared. Professor Constantin had explained it was about the art of persuasion, of arguing a case in such a way as to make your audience agree with you, whether in reality you believed it or not. He set them topics to work on and then they had to persuade their fellow students to accept their viewpoint. Luciano's subject was to be 'When is it right to kill a man?' and he was looking forward to it.



Ayesha wouldn't walk home with Matt, saying she had to get changed for the family meal in the Chinese restaurant.

'But that's hours away,' he protested.

'I've got to look specially nice for your birthday dinner' was all she would say.

So he was dawdling along wondering what to do with himself. He should have been hurrying home to get his work done before the meal but there was nothing that couldn't wait and he rebelled at the idea of doing homework on his birthday; it had been bad enough being cooped up in school all day. He wished he'd had rugby practice or something else physical to do.

It was a fine sunny day, bright and cold with a blustery wind that made Matt think of Brighton. He remembered Eva's card and reluctantly dragged it out of his bag. He had been right – another book token. Matt found himself standing outside an antiques shop; it had some dusty old books in the window among all the candle-snuffers, silver mustard pots and china dogs and, on impulse, he pushed open the door and went in, having a vague idea that if he could get the shopkeeper to take the token, he might be able to buy a dagger or something.

The last thing he expected to see inside the shop was any other students from Barnsbury; it wasn't a typical teenage hang-out. But there, chatting away with the owner as if she'd known him all her life, was the stripey-haired girl with the thing about saving the planet. And the school's fencing champion, Nick Duke.

The whole school knew they were an item, even

though Nick was almost two years younger than his girlfriend. He didn't look it though, since he was almost as tall as Matt and well-muscled. He didn't have a rugby-player's build like Matt but was wirier, like the fencer he was. Matt remembered the girl's name now – Georgia something. She was sporty too, he thought, a keen horse-rider. They were the sort of people he could have been friends with but it hadn't happened, because one was in the year below him and the other in the year above.

The girl didn't look friendly now though. She was frowning at Matt, as if he had no right to be there. But the old man behind the desk was perfectly polite.

'Can I help you, young man?' he asked.

'Er,' said Matt. 'I was wondering if you take book tokens.' He waved Eva's card at the man.

There was a contemptuous snort from the girl.

'Of course he doesn't,' said Georgia. 'This is an antiques shop not a bookshop.'

'But I saw some books in the window,' objected Matt.

'He's quite right, Georgia,' said the old man. 'I certainly do sell books – old ones at least, but it's only the big shops that are part of the book tokens scheme. Was there a particular book you were looking for?'

If the others hadn't been there, Matt might have admitted to this friendly man that he wasn't really looking for a book at all, but he just mumbled something vague and saw out of the corner of his eye that Nick was whispering something to his stropky girlfriend.

'Is it OK if I look round?' Matt asked, wishing he had never come into the shop.

‘Of course,’ said the owner. ‘Take your time – and just let me know if you need any help.’

‘Hi,’ said Nick. ‘You go to Barnsbury, don’t you?’

Matt nodded. ‘Yeah. Just started in the sixth form. Matt Wood.’

Now the girl came closer and said, ‘Hi, I’m Georgia. You’re the guy with the brownies, aren’t you?’

‘It’s my birthday,’ said Matt. ‘My girlfriend made them.’

‘Lucky you,’ said Nick.

‘Oh it’s your birthday,’ said the owner. ‘Many happy returns. That explains the book token. And if we’re doing introductions, I’m Mortimer Goldsmith. But call me Mortimer – Georgia and Nick always do. Now, I think I’ve got some chocolate biscuits somewhere. We should celebrate.’

He bustled off to the back of the shop and Matt relaxed a bit. Maybe Georgia wasn’t as hostile as he thought. And she seemed very matey with this Mortimer.

‘I didn’t really want to buy a book,’ he admitted.

‘Not really your thing?’ asked Nick.

‘I’d rather have something like this,’ said Matt, drawing out a rusty old sword from an umbrella stand.

‘You like weapons,’ said Nick. ‘Ever thought of fencing?’

Matt shook his head. ‘I don’t think I’d be quick enough. Not built for it.’

‘Put the sword away,’ said Georgia quietly. ‘You wouldn’t want it if you’d seen what they can do.’

Matt was surprised but returned the old sword to its place. Maybe she was talking about fencing

accidents. He was rummaging through boxes of odds and ends when Mortimer Goldsmith returned with a laden tray.

‘I brought tea for everyone,’ he said. ‘I hope you don’t mind, Matthew, but Nick and Georgia generally have a cup when they drop in.’

Matt wondered again how come the school fencing champion and a horsey eco-warrior were such pals with the old antiques shop owner; maybe he was the grandfather of one of them?

He put back the broken pocket watch he had been fiddling with and then found, to his surprise that he was holding a book after all. Not a modern paperback and not anything he could imagine exchanging a book token for. It was small and bound in brown leather with thin brown strips of leather wound around it to hold it shut. Matt wondered if it was blank inside, like the old-fashioned sketchbooks he’d seen when Jan took them to a Leonardo da Vinci exhibition. They were on sale in the exhibition shop, with thick creamy cartridge paper inside with rough edges; Harry had wanted to buy one but they were too expensive.

The book was still in his hand as he took a mug of tea and a chocolate Hobnob. It was awkward but somehow he didn’t want to put it down. As soon as he was able to open it, he saw that this one wasn’t blank at all; it was densely printed in old-fashioned heavy black type. The words meant nothing to him – Matt was used to that – but, curiously, the little book attracted him. He was suddenly sure that this was what he wanted to buy. He looked up and saw that both Nick and Georgia were staring intently at him.



Alfredo seemed agitated when Luciano got back home.

‘There’s someone here to see you,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t get rid of him and he wouldn’t give a name. He says he brings a message from Bellezza – otherwise I wouldn’t have let him in at all. But what shall I do? Is it safe to let him see you? Suppose he’s really from Giglia?’

‘Let’s not suppose anything till I’ve spoken to him,’ said Luciano. ‘If he does indeed come from Bellezza, he will be most welcome. Bring him out into the garden and fetch us some wine.’

When Alfredo brought their unexpected visitor through, Luciano knew straight away that this was no stranger.

The young man was little more than a boy of about his own age, tall and slender, wearing humble peasant clothes. A cap was pulled down over his eyes but his demeanour was not humble; in fact he had quite a noble bearing. Something about him made Luciano think of the first time he had straggled to Bellezza.

There was an easy grace in the way the visitor accepted the seat he was offered which told Luciano the truth. Then the stranger pulled off the cap and a cascade of brown curls tumbled down.

‘Happy birthday!’ said Luciano, to Alfredo’s amazement.