

The Last Briar Rose

Chapter one

There were tears in my eyes as I untied the string around the small box. I had taken it out many times in the past year but never looked inside. It was as if in opening it I would be definitively accepting that my father was dead. I had really tried to grasp this in the past year. He was dead and whether or not I opened this box containing a few of his personal possessions he would remain so.

My parents had never married and had lived separately. My father had been a palaeologist specialising in South America and spent most of the time there, with the result that we had not seen each other often. For him the digging up and identification of fossilised bones had been the most important thing in life and he had little understanding of people who didn't want to speak about this for hours on end. During our last telephone calls he had kept saying he wanted to take me with him in the holidays sometime. I hadn't been keen then but now I would have packed my case on the spot if I could have accompanied my father just once.

Blinking back the tears, I focused on what was inside the box.

Right on top lay something heavy wrapped in newspaper. Carefully I opened the paper and there in my hand was a globe the size of an orange. Inside, white flakes floated in transparent liquid and drifted slowly down on to a finely detailed miniature a castle.

I gave the globe a shake and watched as the flakes began swirling and falling on the castle until its towers and battlements were almost completely hidden. I remembered this snow globe. On one of my rare visits to my father I had discovered it on the desk in his study and had been completely fascinated, but he hadn't allowed me to play with it.

I wiped my face with my sleeve, fighting the prickling in the tip of my nose which heralded more tears. Searching the box for a stand I found a heavy black pedestal, it too carefully wrapped. On it in delicate gold letters was engraved *Briar Rose*. Carefully I set the globe in its base and carried it to my shelf where it found a place between my favourite books.

I sat down on the floor in front of the box again. The next item was a photograph album. Leaning back against my bed, I opened the album. The pictures showed my father as a baby, a small child,

starting school and with his leg in plaster. There were photos of long gone Christmases and birthdays and sports fixtures.

My throat had a huge lump in it. It was no use, I simply couldn't go on looking at the photos and slammed the album shut. My grandmother Gracia had given me this box on the day of the funeral. She had stuck a label with my full name on it, Flora Anthea Allenstein, as if she had to make sure not to confuse her only grandchild with someone else.

Keepsakes, Gracia had said, sounding as cold and distant as ever. She would dispose of the rest, she'd continued matter-of-factly. I had been so furious that I'd shouted at her. In retrospect I was a bit sorry; she'd lost her only child after all, and it must be her way of coping. Nonetheless her coldness had been unbearable for me at that moment. Since then I had not seen Gracia.

Further rummaging in the box revealed a slim book bound in dark red velvet. It was very old, the velvet at the corners was worn and had a greasy sheen to it. I opened it eagerly, only to be disappointed immediately. There were innumerable names and dates listed in a barely legible script. I leafed through, finding more and more names and dates until in the middle I came across a page which had clearly been inserted later. A leaf which, when opened out, was around three times the size of the book.

I gave a gasp of astonishment. From the lower edge of the sheet I could see the most beautiful drawing of a rose bush. The artist had obviously been extremely talented as the splendid blooms, thorns and jagged leaves looked absolutely lifelike in their glowing colours. Even the painted dew drops looked as if they might roll down the petals and out of the picture at any moment.

From the bush led stems, extending over the whole page and sub-dividing again and again before they each ended in a delicate curl. They only had withered blooms on them, though, and next to each of them was a name in tiny writing.

My eye was caught by one in particular. It seemed to be pressed right against the edge of the picture, all the way up to the top corner. At the tip it split and the slender stem bore three blooms. They were less dried up than all the others. The last even appeared as if it had only just begun to fade.

I jumped up to fetch my mobile phone. I had to photograph this and then enlarge it so I could read the tiny script. Crouching by the opened sheet I took a photo. It didn't come out particularly well because the old paper wasn't flat, and so I smoothed it out for a second attempt and just as I did so, felt a sudden sting. I took my hand away with a sharp breath of surprise. I must have cut myself on

the edge of the paper. From the tip of my index finger came a drop of bright red blood which fell on to the page before I had a chance to move my hand away.

In dismay I saw that it had landed right on the topmost stem. I was angry, I'd ruined the lovely picture. Before I could do any more damage, I folded the leaf in again, put the book and the photo album safely back in the box and pushed it under the bed. It was all I had left of my father.

Chapter two

As on every Wednesday, the end of our final lesson saw my whole class, who found History deadly boring, transformed into a highly motivated troop. Shouldering their backpacks and clattering chairs on to desks, they were off out of the classroom as if every second counted. Usually I was with them but on this occasion I gathered my things together slowly. On my way to school I'd cycled over a nail, which had resulted in a flat tyre and a foul mood.

'Hey, what's up Flora? Are you planning on spending the night here?' I looked up. Beside my desk stood Anna. To be honest, I wasn't quite sure whether we would have been friends if our mothers hadn't persisted in putting us in the same sandpit when we were aged two, because they were friends and colleagues. Anna and I had been in the same group at nursery and class mates since primary school and now for the last six months we'd even lived in the same building. This was all right really, but sometimes I did wish I could just do what I liked after school without incurring a reproachful look from Anna. Anna's attitude towards homework was so annoying. In her view it was to be done immediately and comprehensively. And if there was a test the next day she wouldn't let go until I'd gone through the whole subject with her at least once.

This really did not fit in with my plans today. If I had to push my bicycle in any case, then I might as well clear up something else which had been on my mind for some time. And that was something I would rather do on my own.

'You go ahead, I'll have to push mine.'

'I'll push mine too,' Anna offered eagerly. 'Then I can quiz you on English as we go.'

I was about as keen on that as a cat on getting into a hot bath, so I resorted to a white lie. 'I still need to take the photos anyway. For art.'

By Friday we had to capture impressions of autumn on our mobiles, which we would then use for a collage. Apart from a toadstool growing right outside our building I hadn't photographed anything yet.

'Oh. The photos,' said Anna who, as I happened to know, had so far also photographed nothing but this toadstool. Art was the one subject Anna really hated, and as I expected she showed no further interest in accompanying me.

'Okay.' She pocketed something which she'd been playing with in her hand the whole time. 'We'll see each other afterwards then,' she said, hurrying off.

'Fine. See you later!'

I went on my own to the cycle park, unlocked my bike and began pushing it towards the city wall.

The wall led once round the old town and was popular with joggers, cyclists and people out walking because it was lined with trees like a woodland path. Its some three kilometres were interrupted only nine times by streets and these were easy to cross. There were a few real places of interest on the wall, for example the little Bismarck House, the Old Botanic Gardens or the historic water mill on the Leine canal. This last was my destination.

Obviously I was familiar with the mill and had even given a presentation on it at school. It had received its licence in 1305, become part of the town's defences in the sixteenth century when the wall had been fortified and had played an important part in providing food for the townspeople in that era. The building itself had been updated around 1766 and most recently renovated in 2006 when it was also given a new mill wheel.

The reason I was interested in the mill and wanted at all costs to come here without Anna had nothing to do with photos for art, but was rather because of a strange letter which I had received a week before. For some time now I'd known it by heart, I'd read it so often.

Dear Flora Anthea Allenstein

As you failed to report to the House of the Genavers following your sixteenth birthday, you have been assigned to the LROK Agency for the duration of your compulsory service.

Please understand that requests to change can no longer be considered.

Report to the Odilie Mill on the Leine canal within the next fourteen days. It is essential that you bring this letter with you.

Included is a notice of instructions for those undertaking compulsory service. You should read this with the necessary care.

We wish you every success and look forward to working with you.

With our compliments

The Council of the Genavers

The letter was adorned with three curlicue signatures in black ink, which gave it a most official appearance.

I had never heard of a Council of the Genavers, and yet the letter was clearly for me, as the presence of my full name and the address at the top of the page showed. I hadn't found the slightest sign of these Genavers on the internet, which had awakened my curiosity, I'll admit.

The letter had arrived exactly a month after my birthday. For a long time I'd mulled over the possibility that someone was playing a trick on me, but by now I'd ruled that out. Hardly anyone knew about my middle name, and the fact that the letter mentioned no specific time likewise made it unlikely. Who was going to lie in wait outside an old mill for fourteen days on the off chance that I would turn up? The instruction leaflet of five closely written pages was also too detailed for a silly prank. Admittedly I had only skimmed through, not studied, it but that had been enough to suggest some question marks.

Of course I had no intention of going into an old mill, which would have been a pretty silly thing to do after all, but I had now cycled past it four times on my way along the city wall. And I had got the strange feeling that the air was thinner, charged with electricity somehow, and I'd had a slight itching on my skin. Anna had been there every time and hadn't noticed anything similar. When, on the latest occasion, I had risked a closer look at the building it had appeared different, no, strange to me. Without being able to put my finger on it, I could have sworn it was suddenly larger, as if overnight an extension had been made to the old mill, one which blended in so perfectly with the half-timbered walls that it went unnoticed. This extension had its own entrance, and no matter how I racked my brains I couldn't remember seeing it before, although the door was painted a very noticeable green.

This time I was approaching from the opposite side, pushing my bicycle from the street and across the car park in front of the mill. There were a few parked cars, a black limousine, a rather rusty and noticeably battered runabout, and a convertible which was elderly but very well maintained. The

driver was sitting inside with the roof down, enjoying the warmth of the last rays of afternoon sun shine. He had tilted the seat far back and had his head on the head rest. He was wearing a pair of large mirrored sunglasses and there was no way of telling whether he could see me or had his eyes shut; either way he paid no attention to me. He merely ran his hand once through his thick dark hair as I went past and locked my bike to a pillar a little further on.

I stood for a while, looking at the tranquil building. The mighty mill wheel was still but its wood creaked softly in the flowing water. The leaves of the trees lining the city wall glowed yellow, orange and every shade of red, making an idyllic frame for the mill. A few raindrops caught here and there in spiders webs on the mill glistened like diamond fragments. It was a beautiful view and I took out my phone for a few photos. My art teacher would be impressed.

A narrow path with three worn steps led to the green door. On one of the steps lay a tabby cat, washing itself thoroughly. It became a model in one of my pictures. I went up to it, knelt down and let it sniff around at my fingers. It purred and I stroked its head.

‘You’re a real beauty,’ I said softly, stroking the dark patch between its white ears. ‘You look as if you’re wearing a toupee, do you know that?’

The cat miaowed and looked at me with amber eyes full of interest.

A sudden puff of wind passed over my head, blowing my hair into my face, and a coloured leaf which had been lying beside the cat flew a little way towards the green door. The leaf danced over the sunlit grass, I snapped my next shot, and discovered a plaque beside the entrance.

Apart from the driver dozing in the convertible there was no one anywhere within sight and so I made my way unobtrusively along the path to the door. Unfortunately the metal plaque was tarnished in places and I had to stand right in front of it in order to make out what it said.

Edgar Krämer, LROK Agency it read. Location and Recovery of Objects of all Kinds

Aha, so this was where I was supposed to report in order to carry out some sort of compulsory service. At an agency for objects of all kinds. Because I had omitted to attend at the House of the Genavers. Well, they could forget that for a start! Whatever went on here, it was a bit too bizarre for me, and besides, the electricity in the air, which I could even hear now, gave me a headache.

No sooner had I turned round than there was a crackle from the intercom and a woman's voice said cheerfully 'Oh, a new face.'

'I...umm.. .Hello' I stuttered in surprise, looking for the camera which had betrayed my arrival. There was a buzzing and with a click the green door opened a little. I didn't move. Should I really go inside? On the other hand, that was why I had come here, I wanted to clear the matter up. Besides, I was longing to know how long this extension had been here and what exactly the LROK Agency did. 'Objects of all kinds' seemed an extremely broad category to me.

Pulling myself together I went in. Instantly my headache disappeared. In front of me was a long thin room which, despite a low wooden-beamed ceiling, seemed much brighter and more modern than one imagines inside such an old half-timbered building. On one wall there were two shelves of ring binders, opposite which stood a massive grandfather clock with a pendulum. It was ticking loudly. A desk was positioned so that it afforded a constant view of the door, and to its right a wooden staircase led to an upper storey.

An elderly lady was seated behind the desk, looking at me with friendly curiosity. Her grey hair was cut in a neat pageboy and she was wearing an elegant pale blue blouse the exact colour of her large, subtly made-up eyes. Even the toes of her shoes appearing from under the desk were the same shade of blue. A newspaper was lying open in front of her, with one of its articles circled in red pen.

'Good afternoon,' I said tentatively, putting my phone away and taking the letter out of my pocket. When I held it out to the lady she shut the newspaper, added it to the stack of others on her desk, took the letter and read it through carefully.

'Hmm,' she said, tucking a pencil behind her ear. 'Unusual. Decidedly unusual.'

'Yes. I just wanted to inform you there must have been a mistake.'

She looked up. 'It looks that way. I must apologise. Somehow the Council's notification appears to have eluded me, otherwise we would obviously have been prepared. You're welcome to sit in the waiting room...'

'No, you misunderstand me. I'm not interested in working here.'

There, I'd said it. The lady appeared nice and I had no wish to offend her but I really had no desire to get involved with service in a dubious firm.

‘Now...Well why didn’t you report to the Council at the correct time? I’m sure they could have assigned you something else. Office work, inventories, messenger service?’

‘But that’s just the problem,’ I explained, increasingly impatient. No matter how tempting it sounded, delivering messages in addition to school and the whole learning thing, I had no need to. ‘I have never applied to the Council of the Genavers for a job. I don’t even know who these Genavers are.’

‘Oh.’

‘Right,’ I said confidently. ‘Then I’ll leave now.’

‘I’m afraid that the Council won’t agree to that, Flora. The contract is binding.’

‘What? I’ve just told you I’ve never applied to them.’

‘It’s a little more complicated than you think.’ She took the pencil from behind her ear, played with it while she appeared to be deep in thought, and added meaningfully, ‘Compulsory service.’

I stared at her angrily. Where had these people got my details from? What contract were they talking about and what was complicated about accepting that I wasn’t going to let myself be landed with a job by some agency doing goodness knows what?

Before I could put my anger into words a little light on her desk began blinking frantically. The lady seized the pile of newspapers and got to her feet. ‘I’m needed in the office. Edgar Krämer will see you very soon.’

A few newspapers slipped out of her grasp and I helped her gather them up again. They were all sensational ones which go in for huge, over-the-top headlines and terms as cheap as they are catchy. The one in my hand, for example, had a front page with ridiculously thick, bold lettering: **Are our Grannies in danger? The Knight of the Rose strikes again!**

Taking back the paper, the lady thanked me before setting off up the stairs, heavily laden but with an easy spring in her step.

I took a deep breath. She had simply left me standing.

Well, this Edgar Krämer had better watch out. If he didn’t delete my details from his computer on the spot then I would give him what for.

I wasn't in the habit of acting so assertively but I was really angry about this dubious behaviour. I hadn't agreed any contract. And then starting on about compulsory service immediately! It was news to me that something like that was legal. I might not be able to put a stop to this agency's activities but at least I would make sure they never bothered me again and that in future they thought twice about taking advantage of unsuspecting young people. The door to another room was standing open. I assumed this was the waiting room which had been mentioned, and rather than stay in front of the desk like a supplicant, I went in.

To my surprise there were two other people, sitting on the two furthest apart chairs as usually happens in waiting rooms. Both were female: in one case I could see only a small amount of black hair peeping over the top of a magazine she was holding up, hiding her face. Her long legs were stretched out in front of her, crossed. The other was blonde with short tousled hair and spectacles. She was perhaps a year or two older than I was, and observing me curiously.

I murmured a greeting and positioned myself an equal distance from each of them, where I could keep my eyes on the desk. The girl with black hair completely ignored me but the blonde lifted her glasses. 'Let me guess...a Little Red Riding Hood, yes? Or a Jorinda. Am I right?'

I had no idea what she was talking about but gave a polite nod. She straightened her specs and leaned forward. 'Not a princess, in any case. You don't look like a princess.'

'Thanks,' I said, although I wasn't sure that was a compliment.

'I couldn't help overhearing what you said to Berta.'

Berta must be the lady behind the desk, and I nodded once more. I wasn't in the mood for conversation. I would have preferred to be left alone to work out what I was going to say to Krämer, but the blonde girl didn't give up. She got to her feet and came to sit next to me, whispering 'Why don't you want to work for the LROK then? I hope you're not connected with the Reguli, are you?'

I wondered whether I'd seen her somewhere before. She had shining green eyes whose gentle expression made her so likeable that I resolved not to take my annoyance out on her.

'The re..? No. I haven't heard of them anymore than I've heard of the other lot.'

'Oh, come on,' she laughed. 'I don't believe that. I'm Val by the way. And that....' – she pointed to the black-haired girl - 'is Neva.'

I looked round and saw that two ice-blue eyes had me in their sights over the top of the newspaper. Their gaze was so cold that I involuntarily moved a little closer to Val.

'I'm Flora,' I said to her.

'Nice to meet you, Flo.'

I was just about to add that I didn't particularly care for the shortened form Flo when Berta came downstairs again.

'Finally! I've been here for ever,' said Neva bad-temperedly, getting up and throwing the magazine on to a little table in the centre of the room, among the chairs. It slithered over the other papers and fell right at my feet.

Neva stood still for a moment and we looked at each other. I guessed she was about my age. Her jet black hair was cut in a straight line exactly level with her chin and set off her long swanlike neck. Her lips were red and her otherwise snow-white skin shimmered a delicate pink beneath her high cheek bones, as if she had just come back from an invigorating walk. She could have been termed flawlessly beautiful, almost unrealistically beautiful, had it not been for the haughtily raised eyebrows and the icy look. As it was she came across as Snow White's evil-tempered twin sister.

Neva turned and marched off. I heard her climbing the creaking staircase, telling someone reproachfully that she didn't have the whole day. Then a door closed behind her.

'I was before her actually,' sighed Val.

A phone rang. Berta sat down behind her desk again and took the call.

I gave a slight cough. Here was my opportunity to sound Val out a little.

'Tell me, what is this Council of the Genavers then?'

Val removed her glasses and let them dangle by one of the legs.

'Well, they're in charge of everything. And so on. You know that.'

As no further explanation was forthcoming I had to go on. 'And this agency here, it belongs to the Council, does it?'

Val laughed. 'Don't let Krämer hear you say that. There's no love lost between them.'

'Aah. But you work here? For the agency?'

'Yes, of course.' Val was chewing on the leg of her glasses. 'I'm a Fabulae.'

'A Fabulae?'

‘Yes. That’s what Krämer’s agents are called. My parents had actually already arranged a post for me in the library at the House of the Genavers. I’d have felt I was cheating my way through compulsory service though. So I applied here off my own bat and Krämer was bowled over by my gift.’

‘Gift?’

‘Yes. I marched straight into Krämer’s office and showed him what I can do.’ And not without pride Val went on, ‘Since I got my driving licence I also carry out special missions.’

‘I see.’ I had gradually had enough of echoing every fifth word as a question, and accepted that the meaning of special missions would forever remain hidden from me.

I looked over at Berta who was still on the telephone, at the same time as her fingers were racing over the keyboard and gave the impression of being thoroughly professional. Too professional for some back street agency. ‘What exactly does this agency do then?’

‘We look after objects.’

‘What kind of objects?’

‘Special ones.’

‘Mmmhh.’ I really didn’t feel I was getting any nearer to the matter so I gave up. Val was nice but also a bit weird. My eyes fell on Neva’s magazine. It had landed open at a double page glossy advert for the latest product from the upmarket Rapushoo brand.

I picked up the magazine and looked at the advert. I had once received a gift of Rapushoo shampoo, it was unbelievable. Unfortunately the stuff was so expensive that I couldn’t afford it. Mum worked a lot but earned just enough to cover day-to-day expenses. I had offered to find myself a job, a respectable one of course, not in a dubious agency like this one, but Mum insisted I concentrate on school. For a while she had even been managing to save a little every month and put it aside for when I went to university. She was proud of my good marks and often told me things would be better for me later on. I always assured her that I wasn’t having a hard time. I wouldn’t want to change places with anyone in the world, even if I couldn’t keep up with the other girls in my class where clothes and make-up were concerned, and usually couldn’t go with them to a café or even the cinema. Luckily Anna didn’t think those activities were important either.

Val had put her glasses back on and was looking at the magazine with me, as if this was only to be expected. ‘What do you think of Rapushoo?’ she asked.

I shrugged. ‘They say they use only natural ingredients.’

‘And the most important thing is that Rapushoo doesn’t test on animals,’ she went on.

‘No? Well as long as they’re not just empty advertising claims.’

‘No. I swear to you,’ Val said, so emphatically that I had to smile.

‘If it wasn’t so expensive I would use it too,’ I confessed and tried to turn the page, but Val stopped me, putting her hand on it.

She squinted intently behind her glasses and bit her lip. ‘Well...I...If you do me a small favour, I could let you have a gift box with the whole new range. Limited Edition.

‘Truthfully?’

That would be amazing. It was Mum’s birthday the next month and I would never be able to save up for such a luxurious present. I was thrilled and was about to agree but then I remembered that I was in the waiting room of a shady agency.

Indignation swept through me. People are lured by a fantastic offer into signing an unbreakable contract compelling them to buy overpriced rubbish for a lengthy period of time. ‘Hang on a minute! Is that it? Does this agency sell subscriptions for cosmetics?’

‘What? That’s nonsense!’ Val whipped her glasses off and stared at me in outrage. ‘I work for Rapushoo on the side, as it were.’

‘Oh?’ I frowned, bewildered. ‘As what?’

‘I’m the guinea pig.’

I couldn’t say more because at that moment a door upstairs flew open with a crash, steps clattered down the staircase and a furious Neva could be heard :

‘...Can’t do that to me, Krämer! I wouldn’t dream of it!’

She stormed past Berta’s desk, followed by a small slightly stout man.

So that was Krämer?