



INK AND BONE

VOLUME ONE OF THE GREAT LIBRARY

RACHEL CAINE

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EPHEMERA

Text of a historical letter, the original of which is kept under glass in the Great Library of Alexandria, and Codexed under the Core Collection.

From the scribe of Pharaoh Ptolemy II, to his most excellent servant Callimachus, Archivist of the Great Library, in the third year of his glorious reign:

Great King Ptolemy, Light of Egypt, has considered your counsel to make copies of the most important works of the Library to be housed in daughter libraries, hereinafter to be called Serapeum, for the access and enrichment of all men. Pharaoh, who is as wide as the Nile in his divine wisdom, agrees to this proposal.

You shall therefore survey the contents of the Great Library and create for him a listing of all works housed therein, which shall serve ever after as the accounting of this great storehouse of the knowledge of the world.

You shall then consult with the Library's Editor to make exact copies of items suitable for the use of the Serapeum, being mindful of the need to provide works that elevate and educate.

By these means shall we further preserve the knowledge we have gathered and hold in trust from ancient times, to be preserved for the future of all who come after.

Pharaoh has also heard your words regarding the unaccompanied admission of females to this sacred space of the Serapeum, and in his divine wisdom refuses this argument, for women must be instructed by the more developed minds of men to ensure they do not wrongly interpret the riches that the Library offers. For a perversion of knowledge is surely worse than a lack of it.

Pharaoh and the gods will grant eternal favour and protection to this great work.

A handwritten annotation to the letter, in the hand of Callimachus:

His divine wisdom can kiss my common arse. We blind and hobble half of the world through such ignorance, and I will not have it. Women shall study at the Serapeum as they might be inclined. Let him execute me if he wishes, but I have seen enough of minds wasted in this world. I have a daughter.

My daughter will learn.

PROLOGUE

Six years ago

‘Hold still and stop fighting me,’ his father said, and slapped him hard enough to leave a mark. Jess went quiet. He hadn’t meant to fidget, but the pouch strapped to his bare chest felt hot and dangerous, like some animal that might turn on him and bite.

He looked up at his father as the man snugged the harness bindings closer. When it was suffocatingly tight, he tossed Jess a filthy old shirt.

He’d done this often enough that while it was still frightening, it was no longer strange . . . but there was a sense that this time the run was different. Why, Jess didn’t know, except that his father seemed more tense than usual.

So he asked, hesitantly, ‘Da . . . anything I should know?’

‘Doesn’t matter a damn what you know. Lose that book to the Garda and you’ll hang, if you’re lucky. If I don’t get you first. You know the route. Run it flat and fair, and you’d best damn well die before you give it to any but the one that’s paid for it.’

Callum Brightwell cast a critical eye over his son’s thin form, then yanked a vest from a chest and shoved it over Jess’s shirt. There was only one button on it. Jess fastened it. It hung two sizes loose, which was the point: better concealment for the harness.

Brightwell nodded and stepped back. He was a smallish

man, runted by poor nutrition in his youth, but now he was dressed well in a bright yellow silk waistcoat and trousers of fine cotton. ‘You look the part,’ he told Jess. ‘Remember to stay with the cutters. Don’t split off on your own unless the Garda spring a trap. Even then, keep to the route.’

Jess ducked his head in acknowledgement. He knew the route. He knew *all* the routes, all the runs that his family held against competitors throughout the vast city of London. He’d trained since he was old enough to walk, clasping the hand of his father, and then later toddling behind his older brother Liam.

Liam was dead now. He’d been seventeen when he’d been taken in by the London Garda for running books. His family hadn’t stepped up to identify him. He’d kept the family’s code. He’d kept his silence to the end.

And as a reward for that loyalty, the City of London had tossed him in an unmarked pit, along with other unclaimed criminals. Liam had been seventeen, and Jess was now ten, and he had no idea how he was supposed to live up to that legend.

‘Da—’ He was risking another slap, or worse, but he took a deep breath and said, ‘Today’s a bad day to be running, you said that yourself. The Garda are out in force. Why can’t this wait?’

Callum Brightwell looked above his son’s head, at the sturdy wall of the warehouse. This was one of many bolt-holes he kept for rarities, and of course, the rarest treasures of all, *books*. Real, original books, shelves and crates full. He was a wealthy, clever man, but in that moment, with the light coming harsh on him through a high, mullioned window, he looked twice his age.

‘Just get on with it. I’ll expect you back in two hours. Don’t be late or I’ll get the cane.’ His father suddenly scowled. ‘If you see your feckless brother, tell him I’m waiting, and there’ll be hell to pay. He’s on the cutters today.’

Even though Jess and Brendan had been born as identical twins, they couldn't have been more different inside. Jess was bold; Brendan tended to be shy. Jess was self-contained; Brendan was prone to explosions of violence.

Jess was a runner. Brendan . . . was a schemer.

Jess knew exactly where Brendan was; he could see him, hiding up on the thin second floor catwalk, clinging to an old ladder that ran towards the roof. Brendan had been watching, as was his habit. He liked to be up high, away from where Da could lay hands on him, and he liked to avoid risking his hide as a runner when he could.

'If I see him, I'll tell him,' he said, and stared hard right at his brother. *Get down here, you little shite.* Brendan responded by silently swarming up the ladder into the darkness. He'd already worked out that Jess was the one running the prize today. Knowing Brendan, he'd decided that his skin was worth more than just acting as his brother's decoy.

'Well?' his father said sharply. 'What are you waiting for, a kiss from your mam? Get on with you!'

He pushed Jess towards the massive, reinforced door of the warehouse, which was opened by three silent men; Jess didn't know them, tried not to learn their names because they died quick in that line of work. He paused and took deep, quick breaths. Getting ready. He spotted the mob of cutters ranged about in the alley and on the street beyond; kids, his age or younger, all ready to run their routes.

They were waiting only for him.

He let out a wild war cry and set off at a sprint. The other cutters took it up as a cheer, thin arms and legs pumping, darting between the startled pedestrians in their workaday clothes. Several lunged out into the street, which was a

hazardous adventure; they darted between steam carriages and ignored the angry shouts of the drivers. The cutters re-formed into a mob of twelve or so kids at the next corner, and Jess stuck with them for the first part of the route. It was safer in numbers, as the streets got cleaner and the passers-by better dressed. Four long blocks of homes and businesses, then a right turn at a tavern already doing good business even so early in the morning; smooth running, until a hard-looking man darted out from a greengrocer and yanked a girl out of his crew by her long hair. She'd made herself too easy to grab; most of the girls knotted up their hair on top of their heads, or shaved it short.

Jess had to fight his urge to slow down and help her.

The girl screamed and fought, but the big man wrestled her to the kerb and backhanded her into a heap. 'Damn cutters!' he yelled. 'Garda! *Garda!* Runners on the loose!'

That tore it. Always some busybody do-gooder trying to save the day, was what Jess's father always said; that's why he sent the cutters in packs, most with worthless decoy rubbish in their harnesses. The Garda rarely scored, but when they did, they paid any informants off richly who put them on the trail of the smugglers.

Citizens turned, eyes avid with the idea of free cash, and Jess tucked his chin down and ran.

The cutters wheeled and broke up and re-formed like a flock of birds. Some carried knives, and used them when grabbed; it was chancy to do that, very chancy, because if a kid was caught with a bloody knife it'd be the rope for sure, whether it was a flesh wound on the man he'd cut, or a mortal blow. The boy to Jess's left – too big to be running, though he was probably younger than Jess's age – veered straight into a wall of oncoming drunks. He had a knife, and slashed with it; Jess

saw a bright ribbon of blood arcing in the air, and then didn't look back.

He couldn't. He had to concentrate on escape.

His route split at the next corner; they'd all break up now, running separately to draw the Garda's numbers thin . . . or at least, that was the plan.

What happened was that when Jess reached the corner, there were Garda bunched up *on his route*. They spotted him and let out a fierce, angry yell.

He made an instant decision he knew his da would beat him black for making; he left the route.

He almost banged into two other cutters as he veered right; they gave him identically startled looks, and one yelled at him to get off their patch. He ignored her, and despite the ache growing in his chest, the smothering drag of the book, he put on a new burst of speed and outpaced them both.

He heard a cry behind him, and glanced back to see the Garda were pouring out from alleyways. Bloody lobsters in their grimy red coats. They swiftly caught the others.

Not Jess, though. Not yet.

He dodged down a dark, twisting passage too narrow to even be named an alley; even as small as he was, his shoulders brushed brick on both sides. A rusted nail caught at his shirt and ripped the sleeve, and for a heart-stopping second he thought the leather of his harness might catch, but he kept moving. Couldn't go fast now, because of the inky darkness in the shadows, but his nose told him it was a popular dumping ground for rotting fish. The bricks felt slimy and cold under his fingers.

He could still hear the Garda hue and cry behind him, but they couldn't fit their thick bodies through this warren, and for a moment, as he spotted a thin slice of light at the end, he

wasn't so sure he could fit either. It narrowed, and narrowed, until he had to turn sideways and edge along with the rough brick tearing at his clothes. The book wedged him in tight as a cork in a bottle, and he fought the urge to panic.

Think. You can get out of this.

He let out his breath and flattened his chest as much as he could, and it gained him the extra half-inch he needed to edge free of the crush.

He stumbled out between two fancy buildings onto a wide, clean street he knew he should recognise, and yet it seemed odd, out of place . . . until it snapped in focus.

He'd come out only three blocks from his family's town house, where his mother and father took such pains looking gentrified. If he was seized here, there'd be some who'd know him on sight, and that would mean much, much worse for not just him; his whole family would be brought down. He had to get out of here. *Now.*

He rushed out into the street, directly under the wheels of a steam carriage, and into the darkness of another alley. It led in the right direction, but twisted wrong soon enough. He'd not explored all the alleys near his home; he had enough to do with the routes the runners used. That was why his father had always ordered him to keep to the route – because it was so easy to be lost in complicated London, and getting lost while carrying contraband could be deadly.

At the next street he spotted a landmark a few blocks away: the glittering dome of St Paul's Serapeum, the physical presence of the Great Library in London, and one of the largest daughter libraries in Europe. It was beautiful and deadly, and he averted his eyes and made a vow to never, *never* go that way.

But he didn't have a choice.

A Garda emerged from a doorway, clapped eyes on him, and shouted. Behind his pointing finger the Garda was young, maybe the age Liam had been when he'd taken the rope. This young man was blond and had a weak chin, and his second-hand uniform fit about as well as Jess's disguise.

But he was fast. Too fast. As Jess took off running he heard the slap of the Garda's feet behind him, and the shrill, urgent toot of his whistle. They'd be coming from all around him. If they boxed him in here . . .

He took the only clear path out of danger. It was another dark, cramped alley, but the Garda was no side of beef, and slipped through almost as easily as Jess did. Jess had to keep running, though his weary lungs were pumping fire, and the long legs of the Garda gained on him when they reached open street again. The watery London sunshine seemed to beat down on Jess's head, and he was dripping with sweat. He was terrified that he might damage the book with it.

Not as terrified as he was of being caught, though.

More whistles. The Garda closed in.

Jess had no choice at all. They were driving him in one direction – towards the Serapeum. If he could get past the Garda barricades there, it was Library territory, and under entirely different laws. The London Garda couldn't trespass without clearances.

Up ahead, he saw the orange-and-black wood of the Garda barricade across the street, and the line of supplicants waiting to have their credentials checked. Jess pulled for his last reserves of speed, because that damned rabbit-heeled Garda was close enough to brush fingers on his shirt. He lurched forward, aimed for a hole in the crowd, and threw himself bodily forward towards the barricade. As the Garda behind him yelled for

help, Jess grabbed the painted tiger-striped wood and vaulted over it in one smooth motion, hit the ground running on the other side, and heard the shouts of surprise and dismay echoing behind him. Someone laughed and yelled at him to keep going, and he grinned fiercely and risked a look back.

The Garda had stopped at the barricade – or, at least, one of his fellows had stopped him by getting in his way and holding him back. The two were scuffling, the younger man shouting angrily. His blood was still up from the chase, or he'd have had more sense. Jess knew he didn't have long; they'd be sending a message to the High Garda, the elite guards of the Library, to intercept him. He needed to get through, and fast.

The street ahead had but maybe fifty people on foot, including at least ten Scholars stalking in their billowing black robes. No steam carriages; they weren't permitted here any more, not since they'd closed this road to through traffic. The golden dome rose up serene and gleaming overhead, and below it, a waterfall of steps flowed down from it.

There were still scars on the steps, despite all efforts to clean it, from the last Burner explosion. Stains from the Greek Fire and the burnt bodies of those who'd been killed. A mound of dying flowers marked the spot, though a groundsman was in the process of shoving them into a bag for disposal. The mourning period was over. Time to move on.

Jess slowed to a jog as he caught sight of the lions. Stone, they resembled, but they had the feral look of life – something caught in a moment of violence, of fury and blood and death about to spring. He'd heard of the automata, machines that moved on their own, but they were far, far more terrifying in person, now that he was close enough to really see them.

Jess risked another look behind. The London Garda would be organising men to meet him beyond the barriers on the other side, if the High Garda of the Library didn't bestir themselves to get him first. He needed to run, quick as lightning, but despite that knowledge his feet slowed down to a walk.

He was smothered by dread. Fear. A horrible sense of being *hunted*.

And then one of the automaton lions turned its head towards him. The eyes shone red. Red like blood. Red like fire.

They could smell it on him, the illegal book. Or maybe just his fear.

Jess felt a wash of cold terror so strong it almost loosened his bladder, but he somehow managed to hold the lion's fiery gaze as he kept walking on. He left the pavement and took to the middle of the street where the authorised pedestrians seemed more comfortably gathered, and hoped to hide himself from those feral eyes.

The lion rose from its haunches, shook itself, and padded down the steps, soundless and beautiful and deadly. The other beasts woke, too, their eyes flickering red, bodies stretching.

A woman on the street – someone who'd been passed through the checkpoint – shrieked in alarm, clutched her bag, and ran for it. The others caught the fever and ran, too, and Jess ran with them, hoping they'd cover him like cutters even though they didn't know they were part of his gang.

When he glanced back, two lions were loping behind them. They weren't hurrying. They didn't have to work very hard to overtake mere humans.

The first lion reached the laggardmost of the fleeing people – a female Scholar, dressed in clumsy robes and burdened with a heavy bag that she'd foolishly not abandoned – and leapt. Jess

paused, because it was the most graceful and horrible thing he'd ever seen, and he saw the woman look back and see it coming and the horror on her face, her shriek cut short as the lion's bulk crushed her down . . .

. . . but the lion never took its eyes off of Jess. It killed her and left her and came on, straight for him. He could hear the whir and click of the gears inside.

He didn't have time to feel the horror.

He'd thought he'd run himself flat out before, but now, *now*, seeing the death that was at his heels, Jess flew. He felt nothing but the pressure of the wind; he knew there was a crowd around him screaming for help and mercy, but he heard none of it. At the far end of the street stood the other Garda barrier, another crowd of people waiting for their turn, but that crowd was starting to scatter. The lions weren't *supposed* to chase anyone past the boundaries of St Paul's, but nobody was going to take that risk. Not even the Garda, who abandoned their stations with the rest.

Jess was the first to the barricade, and he vaulted over it as the lions caught and crushed two more behind him. He tripped and fell and knew, *knew* he would feel death on him in the next heartbeat. He flipped over on his back so he could see it coming, gagged for breath, and held up his hands in an entirely useless defence.

There was no need. The lions pulled up at the barricade. They paced back and forth and watching him with cold, red fury, but they didn't, or couldn't, leap the thin wooden line to come after him.

One roared. It was a sound like stones grinding, and the screams of those it had killed, and he saw the sharp fangs in its mouth . . . and then both the lions turned and padded back

up the street to the steps and back to the landing, where they settled into a waiting crouch.

He could see the bloody paw prints and human wreckage they left in their wake, and he couldn't forget – knew he never would – the look of despair and horror on the look of the woman who'd been the first to be crushed.

My fault.

He couldn't think about that. Not now.

Jess rolled over, scrambled to his feet, and melted into the panicked crowd. He cut back onto his route after another few long, tense blocks. The Garda seemed to have lost the will to chase him. The deaths at the Serapeum would be explained away in the official news; nobody wanted to hear that the Library's pet automata had slipped their leashes and killed innocents. Whispers said it had happened before, but this was the first time Jess had really seen it.

Or believed it.

He stopped at a public fountain to gulp some water and try to stop his shaking, and then a public convenience to check that the book was still snug and safe in its harness. It was. He took a slower pace the rest of the way, and arrived at the end of the route just a few minutes late – exhausted, but weak with relief. He just wanted to be finished, be *home*, for all the cold comfort it would offer him.

Buck up, boy. He could almost hear his father's rough voice. *No one lives for ever. Count the day a victory.*

It might be a victory, Jess reckoned, but it was a hollow one.

His instructions were to look for the man with a red waistcoat, and there the man was, sitting at his ease at an outdoor table. He sipped tea from a china cup. Jess didn't know him, but he knew the type: filthy rich, idle, determined

to make themselves important by collecting important things. Everything the man wore seemed tailored and perfect.

Jess knew how to make the approach. He ran up to the man and put on his best urchin face and said, 'Please, sir, can you spare a bit for my sick mum?'

'Sick, is she?' The man raised his well-groomed eyebrows and set down his cup. 'What ails the woman?'

This was the key question, and Jess held the man's eyes as he said, 'Her stomach, sir. Right here.' He placed a careful finger on the centre of his chest, where his harness formed the bulge beneath.

The man nodded and smiled. 'Well, that would seem to be a worthwhile cause. Come with me and I'll see you right. Come on, now, don't be afraid.'

Jess followed. Around the corner waited a beautiful steam carriage, all ornate curls of gold and silver and black enamel, with some coat of arms on the door that he only got a quick glance at before the man boosted him up inside. Jess expected the buyer to follow him in, but he didn't.

The inside of the carriage had a glow tube running around the top that cast a dim golden light, and by it Jess realised that the one he'd taken for the flash client was really only a servant.

The old man sitting across from him was ever so much grander. His black suit seemed sharp enough to cut, the shirt the finest quality silk, and he looked effortlessly pampered. Jess caught the rich gleam of gold at his cuffs, and the shine of a huge diamond on the stickpin piercing his silk tie.

The only detail that didn't fit with the image of a toff were the ice-cold eyes in that soft, wrinkled face. They looked like a killer's.

What if this isn't about the book? Jess thought. He knew

kids could be taken for vile purposes, but his father always made precautions, and punished those who took advantage of cutters . . . which was passing rare, these days, as even the toffs knew they weren't safe from the long, strong arm of the Brightwells.

But looking at this man, nothing seemed so safe as all that. He glanced at the wide windows, but they were blacked out. No one could see inside.

'You were late.' The toff's voice was soft and even. 'I'm not accustomed to waiting.'

Jess swallowed hard. 'Sorry, sir. Only by a minute,' he said. He unbuttoned his vest and pulled off his shirt, and worked the buckles behind his back to release the harness. It was, as he feared, dark with sweat, but the book compartment had been well lined, and the book itself wrapped in layers of protective oiled paper. 'The book's safe.'

The man grabbed for it like an addict for a pipe, and ripped away the coverings. He let out a slow breath when his trembling fingers touched the ornate leather casing.

With a jolt of shock, Jess realised that he knew that book. He'd grown up seeing it in a glass case in his father's deepest, darkest secret treasure trove. He didn't yet read Greek, but he knew what the letters incised on the leather cover meant, because his father had taught him that much. It was the only existing hand copy of *On Sphere Making* by Aristotle, and one of the first ever bound books. The original scroll had been destroyed by a Burner at the Alexandrian Library ages ago, but there had been one copy made. This one. Owning it carried a death penalty. *When you steal a book, you steal from the world*, the Library propaganda said, and Jess supposed it might be true.

Especially for this book.

He'd been running the rarest and most valuable thing in the entire *world*. No wonder his father hadn't dared tell him what he carried.

The man looked up at him with an insanely bright gleam in his eyes. 'You don't know how long I've waited for this,' he said. 'There's nothing like possessing the best, boy. Nothing.'

As Jess watched in numb horror, the man *tore a page from the book and stuffed it into his mouth*.

'Stop!' Jess shrieked, and snatched for the book. 'What are you *doing*?'

The old man shoved back, and pinned Jess against the carriage wall with a silver-tipped walking stick. He grinned at him and ripped another page loose to chew and swallow.

'No,' Jess whispered. He felt horror-stricken, and he didn't even know why. This was like watching murder. Defilement. And it was somehow worse than either of those things. Even among his family, black trade as they were, books were holy things. Only the Burners thought different. Burners, and whatever this perverse creature might be.

The old man leisurely ripped loose another page. He seemed relaxed now. Sated. 'Do you understand what I'm doing, boy?'

Jess shook his head. He was trembling all over.

'I have fellows who spend fortunes to slay the last living example of a rare animal and serve it for a dinner party. There's no act of possession more complete than consuming the unique. It's *mine* now. It will never be anyone else's.'

'You're mad,' Jess spat. He felt as though he might spew all over the fine leather and brightwork, and he couldn't seem to get a clean breath.

The rich man chewed another page and swallowed, and his expression turned bitter. 'Hold your tongue. You're an

unlettered guttersnipe, a *nobody*. I could kill you and leave you here, and no one would notice or care. But you're not *special enough* to kill, boy. Ten a penny, the likes of you.' He ripped out another page. When Jess tried to grab for the book again, the old man pulled it out of his reach and smacked him soundly on the side of the head with the cane.

Jess reeled back with tears in his eyes and his head ringing like the bells of St Paul's. The man rapped on the carriage door. The flash servant in his red vest opened the door and grabbed Jess's arm to haul him out to sprawl on the cobbles.

The toff leant out and grinned at him with ink-stained teeth. He tossed something out – Jess's rag-picker shirt and vest. And a single gold coin.

'For your troubles, gutter rat,' the old man said, and shoved another page of something that had once been perfect into his maw to chew it to bits.

Jess found he was weeping, and he didn't know why, except he knew he could never go back to what he'd been before he'd climbed in that carriage. Never not *remember*.

The man in the vest climbed up to the driver's seat of the carriage. He looked down on Jess with an unsmiling, unfeeling stare, then engaged the engine.

Jess saw the old toff inside the carriage tip his hat before he slammed the door, and then the conveyance lurched to a roll, heading away.

Jess came to his feet and ran a few steps after the departing carriage. 'Wait!' he yelled, but it was useless, worthless, and it drew attention to the fact he was half-naked, and there was a very visible smuggling harness clutched to his chest. Jess wanted to retch. The death of people crushed under the paws of the Library's lions had shocked him, but seeing that

deliberate, horrifying destruction of a book, especially *that* book – it was far worse. St Paul had said, *lives are short, but knowledge is eternal*. Jess had never imagined that someone would be so empty that they'd need to destroy something that precious, that unique, to feel full.

The carriage disappeared around a corner, and Jess had to think about himself, even shaky as he was. He tightened the buckles on the harness again, slipped the shirt over his head and added the vest, and then he walked – he did not run – back to the warehouse where his father waited. The city swirled around him in vague colours and faces.

He couldn't even feel his legs, and he shivered almost constantly. Because the route had been burnt into him, he walked by rote, taking the twists and turns without noting them, until he realised he was standing in the street of his father's warehouse.

One of the guards at the door spotted him, darted out, and hustled him inside. 'Jess? What happened, boy?'

Jess blinked. The man had a kind sort of look at the moment, not the killer Jess knew he could be. Jess shook his head and wiped at his face. His hand came away wet.

The man looked grave when Jess refused to speak, and motioned over one of his fellows, who ran off quick in search of Jess's father. Jess sank down in a corner, still shaking, and when he looked up, his mirror image was standing in front of him – not quite his mirror, really, since Brendan's hair had grown longer and he had a tiny scar on his chin.

Brendan crouched down to stare directly into his brother's eyes. 'You all right?' he asked. Jess shook his head. 'You're not bleeding, are you?' When Jess didn't respond, Brendan leant closer and dropped his voice low. 'Did you run into a fiddler?'

Fiddler was the slang they used for the perverts, men and women alike, who liked to get their pleasure from children. For the first time, Jess found his voice. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Not like that. Worse.’

Brendan blinked. ‘What’s worse than a fiddler?’

Jess didn’t want to tell him, and at that moment, he didn’t have to. The office door upstairs slammed, and Brendan jumped to his feet and disappeared again as he climbed up a ladder to the darkened storage where the book crates were hidden.

His father hurried over to where his eldest son sat leaning against the warehouse wall, and quickly ran hands over him to check for wounds. When he found none, he took off Jess’s vest and shirt. Callum breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the harness sat empty. ‘You delivered,’ he said, and ruffled Jess’s hair. ‘Good lad.’

Approval from his father brought instant tears to Jess’s eyes, and he had to choke them down. *I’m all untied*, he thought, and he was ashamed of himself. He hadn’t been hurt. He hadn’t been fiddled. Why did he feel so sullied?

He took a deep breath and told his father the truth, from the lions and the dead people, to the toff in the carriage, to the death of *On Sphere Making*. Because that was what he’d seen: a murder – the murder of something utterly unique and irreplaceable. That, he began to realise, was what he felt that had left him so unsettled: grief. Grief, and horror.

Jess expected his father – a man who still, at heart, loved the books he bought and sold so illegally – to be outraged, or at least share his son’s horror. Instead, Callum Brightwell just seemed resigned.

‘You’re lucky to get away with your life, Jess,’ he said. ‘He must have been drunk on his own power to let you see that,

and walk. I'm sorry. It's true, there are a few like him out there; we call 'em ink-lickers. Perverts, the lot of them.'

'But . . . that was *the* book. *Aristotle's* book.' Jess understood, at a very fundamental level, that when he'd seen that book be destroyed, he'd seen a light pass out of the world. 'Why did you do it, Da? Why did you sell it to him?'

Callum averted his eyes. He clapped Jess hard on the shoulder, and squeezed with enough force to bend bone. 'Because that's our business. We sell books to those who pay for the privilege, and you'd best learn that what is done with them after is not our affair. But still, well done. Well done this day. We'll make a Brightwell of you yet.'

His father had always been strict about his children writing nightly in their handwritten journals, and Jess took up his pen before bed. After much thought, he described the ink-licker, and what it was like seeing him chew up such a rare, beautiful thing. His da had always said it was for the future, a way for family to remember him once he was gone . . . and to never talk about business, because business lived beyond them. So he left that part out, running the book. He only talked about the pervert and how it had made him feel, seeing that. His da might not approve, but no one read personal journals. Even Brendan wouldn't dare.

Jess dreamt uneasily that night of blood and lions and ink-stained teeth, and he knew nothing he'd done had been well done at all.

But it was the world in which he lived, in London, in the year 2025.