

THE LESSER EVIL

Time's Fickle Glass
Volume I

The Lesser Evil

TRISTAN STONE

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TO LAURA
with all my love.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Part One: <i>The World Changes</i>	Pg 3
Part Two: <i>The Lesser Evil</i>	Pg 119
Part Three: <i>Thinking Makes It So</i>	Pg 215
Part Four: <i>Decisions and Revisions</i>	Pg 285
About The Author	Pg 317

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TRISTAN STONE

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THE LESSER EVIL

“Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”

– Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

“Now, pleasure is in *itself* a good: nay, even setting aside immunity from pain, the only good: pain is in itself an evil; and, indeed, without exception, the only evil; or else the words good and evil have no meaning.”

– Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*

TRISTAN STONE

Part One

*The world turns and THE WORLD CHANGES,
But one thing does not change.
In all of my years, one thing does not change,
However you disguise it, this thing does not change:
The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.*

TS Eliot - Choruses from The Rock

CHAPTER ONE

Time travel complicates most things, especially time; so I will have to tell you that it started, as these things often do, with a girl:

There was no reason we should have met really; she was in Year 10 and I was a year below her. She had things like GCSEs to concentrate on and I hadn't even chosen my Options yet. Also, she was from this totally loaded family – which explains her name – and I was just your average working-class teenager, living with his mum and sister. It was like Romeo and Juliet or something: total opposites.

My school, Westernford C of E, isn't exactly famous for its out-of-classroom learning experiences. I often think the place is a bit of a throw back to schools of the 1950s anyway – what with the brown uniforms, old fashioned bells and eccentric teachers. We didn't go on any trips in Year 7, one visit to a box factory in Year 8 and then a coach fifteen minutes down the road to this Tudor House in the October of Year 9.

I love October because it's usually not too wet or cold; the trees are all different colours; there's Half Term to look forward to at the end, and conkers to collect in the

THE LESSER EVIL

meantime. Except we're not allowed to play conkers any more because of health and safety (but we obviously do because the teachers don't care. I mean, it's not that they don't care but they just don't think we're going to die from hitting a conker).

I had been ill for the last couple of days with some flu or cold that I reckon I got from my sister, Kirsty, who had probably got it off some scabby boy she shouldn't have been kissing. She seems to have a new one every week. Mum doesn't seem to notice, as she's at work most of the time. Not that I'm saying she's wrong to be at work all the time – she has to so she can feed us – it's just that that probably explains why Kirsty gets away with a lot of what she gets away with.

Anyway, let's not talk about my sister. The point is, that I had been off school for a couple of days and so hadn't been told Araminta would be joining our trip.

So I'm sitting on the same old red-and-white *Black Orchid Travel* coach the school hires every year, halfway towards the back, on the right, by myself, failing to do a crossword, when my pen runs out, so I lean forward and call to Josh, two seats in front, to borrow his pen, except he can't hear me because he's plugged in to his iPod. Then, suddenly, this girl, sitting in the aisle opposite me and about three seats up, says:

"Here, use mine." At first I don't see her, just this sort of stick thing, poking out of the aisle. When I say *stick*, I mean, it looked like a sort of twig. I lean forward and see this hand, passing the stick/pen to me.

"Oh, thanks," I say. Then, the owner of the hand comes into view and I just sit there, gawping at this gorgeous girl with red hair and freckles. She smiles at me and then sort of nods her head and I realise that I haven't as yet taken the pen, and she leans back in her seat and looks out the window. She must be the only person besides

TRISTAN STONE

myself who isn't listening to music. I'm not, because Mum can't afford to buy one for both of us so Kirsty and I share the ancient 4th gen Nano. Probably got it from a museum. Of course, when I say 'share,' I mean that she uses it and I steal the headphones on occasion to remind her I'm owed a turn (which I never get).

I turn the pen over in my hand. It's essentially a hollowed-out tree branch with a biro jammed up inside. Different.

"All right, do *not* move yet, thank you very much!" booms the voice of Mr Travis, our History teacher. Everyone groans and removes their earplugs and seat belts, sitting half up out of their seats, poised for the inevitable squashing to get off the coach.

"Listen to me. Listen carefully: *no one* but *no one* is to touch *anything* inside the house." Callum Taylor puts his hand up and I can see Mr Travis raise his eyes in expectation of a stupid question.

"Taylor?"

"What about the handrail on the stairs, sir? It should have a hand rail, surely?"

"Taylor?"

"Sir?"

"Your mum..." Everyone guffaws at this. Callum, opening his mouth to protest, is cut short by Mr Travis recovering his professionalism:

"Your mum, I am sure, Taylor, taught you some common sense. Kindly use it before you open your mouth to ask a question in the future." Callum looks down at the floor and mutters an abashed, "Sir."

Soon enough we are allowed off and push our way onto the narrow street in front of this old-looking, timber building. I must have gone past it hundreds of times but I don't recall noticing it before. Looking at it straight on I realise that it sort of bends. I cock my head in an attempt to straighten the house when I feel someone bash into me

THE LESSER EVIL

and, before I know it, I'm on the pavement. Seems that Big Dan decided to rugby tackle Callum in the queue and tripped up onto me. It's not a biggie but Mr Travis glares at me. Then, as I look up, I notice a slender, freckled hand reaching out. I look up and into Araminta's blue eyes. When I say 'look,' I probably stared because she raises an eyebrow and says:

"May I have my pen back, please?" It is then that I notice I had automatically taken her hand in mine, thinking she was offering to pull me up. I also seem to have attracted a crowd of leering spectators who will now deride me for the remainder of the visit.

"Oh, sorry," I bumble, "erm, yes, I err...sorry, I thought –" Araminta interrupts my digging-myself-into-a-hole by pulling me to my feet.

"Come *on*, Jones, we haven't got all day!"

"Sir!" I acknowledge, still staring into Araminta's eyes and then, checking myself and doing a quick dust down, I turn aside to enter the house.

Inside, there is a funny smell. It's not quite musty; in fact, what really strikes me is how *fresh* the scent is. It reminds me of a bakery. This of course makes me hungry, because I rushed out of the house without breakfast again. Mum is always telling me that it's "the most important meal of the day," but, to be honest, I'd rather forgo some cereal than have a Late Detention with Ms. Woolbeck. You'd understand if you met her; she has nasty breath and makes this really annoying clicking sound with her tongue.

We have been met by the Curator – a balding man in a tweed jacket and red cords that *really* don't go well together. He is lecturing us about the original infrastructure of the property or something and about how this guy, Edward something-or-other, invested some money into it because he believed there was something of value in the house. The idea of hidden treasure makes me curious but then he trails

TRISTAN STONE

off into something else and my stomach rumbles loudly.

There is a definite draft in the house and most of us are shivering so we move a bit further in and he show us this old fireplace which has a fire going. Everyone is quite glad about that, although it seems a bit smoky.

“Now then, you might notice that this fireplace has been added to the property since the original build,” says the Curator. Mr Travis nods affirmatively and the Curator continues: “Can anybody tell me *how* we know that?” Dead silence.

“Well, when was the house built?” Further awkward pause. “I did tell you earlier?”

“1520, sir.” Luke, of course.

“Thank you, young man. 1520 is correct. So what clues do we have as to the relative age of the fireplace? I’ll let you have a little think about that for a moment whilst I attend to another matter. Mr Travis –” and the two men disappear from the room for a few moments. It’s a small room as it is and with more than a class load of kids it seems very crowded so I don’t get a look in at first. However, almost everyone else seems fairly bored and, noticing the absence of staff in the room, my peers decide it’s a perfect opportunity to update their Facebook and Twitter statuses, leaving me alone by the fireplace. It is beautiful, decorated with a mosaic depicting the story of the Garden of Eden up either panel, with the words, *Ye shall be as goddes* coming out the mouth of the serpent, who seems to be offering Eve a piece of fruit. Although, as I look closer at the fruit I notice that it’s not an apple like it usually is. In fact, it doesn’t even look like a fruit. More like an egg. It’s odd. I want to get closer but the heat from the flames is pretty much unbearable.

“Well, anyone?” The others snap their phones back into the pockets and shrug their shoulders in vague “am-I-bovered?”-ness. We’re about to be told when I suddenly think of something.

THE LESSER EVIL

“Is it because of the Bible verse?”

“Go on, boy.”

“Well,” I proceed, tentatively, “it’s in English?”

“And?”

“And wasn’t the Bible still in Latin in 1520?”

“Gold star. You’re absolutely right. You’re the first to get that one right. Well done. The carving is rather unusual in itself of course and the choice of text isn’t exactly orthodox. Why use the serpent’s words and not God’s or Eve’s? You see what I mean? Oh and, incidentally, who can tell me when the Great Bible was produced in English?” I shrink back into the shadows, not wanting to be branded a total teacher’s pet, and brush up against Ryan who mimics the Curator and makes a sucking noise at me.

“Ooh, well done Christopher. Kissy-kiss. Teacher’s pet!”

“Shut up Ryan.” I catch a glare from Mr Travis and mutter an apology before following the others into the next room.

That night, over a late frozen-fish and chips supper, Mum asked me why I was so unusually quiet.

“Oh, nothing,” I said and smiled. Kirsty must have known there was something different because she kicked me under the table and gave me a look.

“How was the trip?”

“Yeah, fine. Actually I got this question right that no one else did.”

“Great. That’s great, sweetie. Would you pass me the vinegar please?” I obliged and we sat in silence for the next five minutes until Kirsty got up and said, “Mum, I forgot to tell you I’m supposed to be buddying this new girl so is it cool if she comes over?”

“Oh, a new girl? Where’s she from?”

“I dunno.”

“Didn’t you ask?”

TRISTAN STONE

“No, I only found out about it last period when Miss Humphreys asked me to, like, orienteer her. She been here, like, a few days but they didn’t buddy her up yet.” Kirsty stacked the plates and took them into the kitchen for me to wash up.

“What’s her name?”

“Dunno!” called Kirsty from the kitchen.

“Something posh.”

“What did she say?”

“‘Something posh,’ I think, Mum. I’ll wash up, shall I?” Mum nodded and I retreated into the kitchen, only to be interrogated by Kirsty:

“So what’s with you?”

“What do you mean, what’s with me? Nothing’s *with* me.”

“Yes there is – I can tell.”

“Well, there’s nothing *to* tell.” I pushed past her and put on the rubber gloves.

“Chris has got a secret, Chris has got a secret!” chanted Kirsty.

“No I haven’t got a secret; don’t be ridiculous.”

Kirsty wasn’t giving up.

“Look, if you *must* know, there was a girl today – a new girl – on the trip, who I thought was quite...different.”

“New girl? On your trip?”

“Yeah. She um, she had red hair and freckles and she seemed a bit sort of different.”

“Posh,” said Kirsty.

“Sorry?”

“Posh. She comes across as being a bit sure of herself, doesn’t she?”

“What do you mean?” I said, scraping off a bit of batter that had got stuck to Kirsty’s plate.

“That’s the girl I was meant to be, like, shadowing or buddying or whatever.”

“It can’t be!”

THE LESSER EVIL

“Why not?”

“That would mean she’s in your year but it was a Year 9 trip.”

“No, I remember now, I was told she had gone on a trip today because she’s doing this special research project on the Tudors or something. Well, that’s what Miss Humphreys said.”

I said nothing and turned the tap on instead to let it run hot.

“You like her, don’t you? You *like* her.”

“Don’t be stupid. She’s in Year 10.”

“So? You still *like* her. I think it’s sweet. I’ll go tell Mum.”

“No you *won’t!*” I said and flicked water at her.

CHAPTER TWO

Araminta wasn't thrilled when her family had told her they would be moving house for the fifteenth time in as many years. It seemed that every time she had had a chance to settle down and make friends, they were taken away from her. Consequently, Araminta had learned to maintain a certain distance from people: it was less painful to part that way.

This latest house was, at least, comfortable. More than comfortable, in fact – it had the character and size of an old manor house.

“It's a little ostentatious, don't you think, darling?” said Araminta's mother to her husband, Dr Stirling, when they first arrived.

“I like it,” said Araminta, “and there'll be lots of inspiration for your writing, Mother.” Katherine Stirling smiled at her daughter and hoped that she would forgive her parents for such an interrupted upbringing. The house, it was true, was certainly inspiring and, if she were honest with herself, Katherine had felt a little claustrophobic in their last London apartment.

THE LESSER EVIL

“So, what’s your first week been like, then?” asked Dr Stirling over their Sunday roast.

“It’s been fine, thank you.”

“I’m sorry it’s not exactly Eton, darling,” said Katherine as she passed the horseradish sauce to her daughter.

“Well I’m not a boy, am I, so I couldn’t go there, could I? Anyway, it’s absolutely fine. Really,” said Araminta, reassuringly, then muttered something about it being a throwback to the 1950s.

“Have you managed to make any –?” started Dr Stirling.

“Any *friends*? Well there are friendly people there but I don’t know if we’re even likely to be staying here long; so is it even worth my while trying to pursue a friendship that’s doomed to a premature death?” Both her parents took their forks out of their mouths and looked at their daughter intently.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, I wasn’t meaning to blame or accuse you or anything; it’s just that it so often happens to me that I go to all these efforts to fit in with people and then, when I finally have people I care about, or who care about me, we have to move away.”

“I know, darling, but I think this time – ” and here, Dr Stirling trailed off to seek approval from his wife, who pushed her horn rimmed glasses up her nose and nodded.

“I think that this time,” he continued, “we can be confident that we won’t need to leave any suitcases packed.” Araminta looked at her mother and then her father.

“You mean you – ?”

“Your Father thinks he has found it.”

“Here?”

“Well, you see, I finally solved the keyword.”

“Father, that’s *amazing!*”

“Only taken four years.” Here, Dr Stirling leaned across the table and took his daughter’s hand: “I’m so sorry I

TRISTAN STONE

haven't been much of a father those four years. And before that even."

"Don't be silly, Father – "

"No. I'm not. I know you've had your interests but you must have been so lonely, being an only child and having to move away from any friends you've made all the time."

"I didn't say it for that."

"We know, sweetheart," said Katherine, softly.

"Anyway, I think things are going to change around here, pretty soon. I must be close now and, once it's all over, we can finally start living the lives we've pretended to have for so long."

Araminta knew better than to ask for more particulars about her father's work. He had always told her as much as he thought she needed to know and he might have kept her completely in the dark, so Araminta respected the boundaries of her permitted knowledge. However, her mother was quite sensible to Araminta's feelings and so she changed the subject:

"So; any *boys*?"

"At Westernford?! I don't think so!"

"Don't judge by appearances, Araminta," said Dr Stirling, raising his eyebrow in admonishment.

"Well, it's a good job most people do, with us, isn't it?" Araminta rebutted quickly, stuffing a carrot in her mouth.

"Touché, sweetheart. But, come on, is there no one?"

"Well," said Araminta slowly, "there was this *one* boy – on the trip last week?" Her parents nodded for her to continue. "Well I didn't *like* him or anything, it's just that he seemed a bit, I don't know, *different* from the others?"

"Different how? Has he got three arms?"

"Mother! No. It's just that he seemed pretty intelligent. There was this really interesting carving on a fireplace and he totally got that it didn't fit with the rest of the house."

"What do you mean?" said Dr Stirling, sharply. Araminta tried to describe the carving as accurately as

THE LESSER EVIL

possible to her father, who was becoming increasingly business-like in his questions.

“Try to remember, Araminta, this is extremely important.”

“Sorry, Father, I wasn’t right up close to it.”

“But you say the fruit shown in the carving wasn’t like an apple?”

“No. Definitely not.” At that, Dr Stirling got up out of his seat as if somebody had fired a pistol at him, and dived into the next room to retrieve a large, leather bound book. He threw it down on the dining room table with a triumphant thud and said,

“There!”

“Where?” asked Araminta, confused at the blank page that had been set before her.

“Huh? Oh, sorry,” said Dr Stirling, thumbing through the pages until he found what he was looking for – a sketch of an oval object, not unlike an egg, with Greek letters etched into its side.

“Oh my gosh, that’s *it!*” exclaimed Araminta.

“Now, are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m absolutely certain. Hundred per cent.”

Dr Stirling closed the book and looked at his wife.

“You know what this means?” he said and paused dramatically. “This means we are very, *very* close.”

CHAPTER THREE

I don't know if you have an elder sister or not but I don't recommend it. Sometimes I wonder if it's the age thing, or if it's because she's a girl, or just because she's my sibling; although I do have mates who have sisters and they're not quite as annoying as Kirsty. Take this for example:

I was sitting, comfortably, in the lounge, when I heard her scream my name from upstairs:

“Christopher! Where are my headphones?”

“*Your* headphones?”

“Yes! The ones I bought last week.”

“I don't know.” Kirsty appeared at the door and switched off the TV with her universal remote. She's such a child.

“Hey, I was watching that!”

“What?”

“The programme.”

“No you weren't, Chris – you were playing on your

THE LESSER EVIL

phone.”

“Wasn’t.”

“Err...yes you were. Anyway. Headphones. Now!”

She held out her hand. To be fair I *was* playing on my phone because I was trying to beat Josh’s high score.

“Look, I haven’t even seen them. Hang on, do you mean the pink ones?”

“Yes.” Kirsty gave me a filthy look.

“I haven’t touched them! I haven’t! I *do* know what happened to them though.” There was an awkward silence and Kirsty switched on the TV.

“Happy now?”

“Thank you.”

I had been watching the News. Well, not watching. Most of it’s pretty boring. Politics and economics and stuff I don’t really understand. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the word MURDER, though, so I turned up the volume. I read on my paper round a week ago that they’d found a body in a skip about a dozen miles up the road from us. Apparently it looked like a professional kill and there had been a domino piece near the body. Now it seemed there was a second victim.

“So?”

“Kirsty, this might be important!”

“My headphones – where are they?”

“Oh, Mum found them. They went through the wash.”

“Great!”

“Serves you right for hogging the iPod all the time.”

“Yeah cause last time you had it – ”

“You mean the *one* time I had it – ”

“You erased all my music and synced it with your own

rubbish.”

This is true. But mostly because she'd filled its memory with the latest noise from the X Factor factory.

“Mozart isn't rubbish, Kirsty.”

“I was talking about that weird hip-hop stuff.”

“The *Rap Canterbury Tales*? They're great! Educational *and* fun.”

“Shut up Chris, don't be so sad.”

“Where are you going, anyway?”

“Going for an ice cream.”

“It's freezing cold!” Without saying another word, Kirsty walked out of the room and, five minutes later, I heard the front door slam shut.

I usually spent my Saturdays with friends or catching up on homework. Sam was visiting his mum this weekend and Josh and Tom had gone to Thorpe Park so I was left on my own with the choice of writing up the visit to the Tudor House or watching repeats of rubbish shows on TV. I could have done some piano practice but I wasn't especially in the mood for that either. I'm not very good but I always wanted to be in a band so I had lessons from quite a young age and can play to a passable standard. I was probably going to choose GCSE Music as one of my Options.

The homework didn't take too long. I did try to do some research about the fireplace carving but couldn't come up with anything. I found a few different things about the Bible verse and then started reading Philip Pullman's take on it in *His Dark Materials*.

Just as I sat down to the piano to do some song writing while my mum and sister were out of the house, I heard a key in the lock. I listened out for the usual, “hiya” from

THE LESSER EVIL

Mum but there wasn't one so, figuring it must be Kirsty, I ducked out of the dining/music room and made for the staircase.

"Oh, heya," said a girl's voice. I turned round slowly, with my left hand still on the banister and was surprised to see Araminta standing in my hall, next to Kirsty.

"Hi."

"So you must be Kirsty's brother."

"Yep." I realised I should probably say something more and so added, "Chris. My name's Chris."

"It's nice to meet you, Chris," she said, offering me her hand which I took. "I'm Araminta."

"Araminta. I don't know any Aramintas. What does it mean?"

"I think it was made up for a book or something."

"Oh." Kirsty was obviously not impressed.

"Bugger off upstairs, Christopher, there's a good boy."

"I was just about to do some piano practice actually."

"No you weren't, you had your hand on the banister," said Kirsty.

"You play piano?" asked Araminta. She sounded interested so I said, "Yes. Well, just a bit. Do you?"

"I used to. I play the 'cello."

"That's great."

"Yeah. Whatever. Araminta, would you like a drink?"

"Please."

"Right, come this way." Pushing past me, Kirsty mouthed *bugger off* and I went into the front room to play some scales when I saw Mum arrive home with a car full of shopping.

"You're home early," I said as I carried the bags in.

TRISTAN STONE

“Yes.” She looked tired. Her hair – long over due a visit to the salon – was getting a bit greasy. She looked like she hadn’t slept properly for days. And she’d been biting her thumb again.

“Where’s your sister?”

“Oh, she has Araminta round.”

“Who?”

“The girl she has to buddy?”

“Right. She did say.”

We carried the shopping into the kitchen silently and Kirsty introduced her to Araminta, who immediately offered to help with the unpacking ritual. Possibly my least favourite chore. I always hope Mum will have picked up some chocolately bargain and am usually disappointed.

Araminta accepted the offer to stay to dinner and we all sat down to a Bolognese an hour later. Araminta was a pretty deft hand in the kitchen, although she did suggest adding cinnamon to the sauce which was vetoed. Apparently it’s what they do in Norway, where she lived for a couple of years.

“So, you’ve stayed in some interesting places, Araminta,” said Mum as we were eating.

“Yes. I was in South Africa for the last two years.”

“Wow, that’s amazing!” said Kirsty, “I’ve always wanted to go to Africa!”

“Was it very different to here?”

“Well, I suppose the thing is that I’ve not spent much time in England at all so it’s difficult to draw comparisons.”

“But how are you liking it so far?” I said.

“It’s fine.” She smiled and added some parmesan to her Bolognese.

THE LESSER EVIL

“So what do your folks do?” Mum asked. She uses the word ‘folks’ when she doesn’t know someone because she hates it when people assume that we have both parents at home and there are loads of people in my year group who don’t live with either of their real parents.

“Well, Mother is a writer and Fath—”

“A writer? That’s amazing!” I said, rather too emphatically, spitting my sauce out. “I always wanted to be a writer. What does she write?”

“Um, mainly historical fiction.”

“Would I have heard of her?” asked Mum.

“You might have. Katherine Stirling?” Clearly none of us had heard of her so there was a bit of an awkward pause where we all just looked ignorant.

“It’s all right, she isn’t, like, really famous anyway.”

“And your dad? I interrupted you earlier, sorry.”

“Oh, that’s ok,” said Araminta, smiling at me, “so Father is an academic – a theologian. He’s been researching something for the Divinity Faculty at Cambridge.”

“That’s funny, I’ve just been re-reading *Northern Lights* and there are lots of theologians in that,” I said cheerfully – and then realised that all the theologians are the baddies in *His Dark Materials* so I tried to say that I wasn’t trying to say that Araminta’s dad was a villain but then I just got tongue tied so Kirsty kicked my shins and said,

“Shut up, Stupid!” which might have been helpful, or not. Fortunately, Mum helped me out by changing the subject:

“So, does your father have to commute much?”

“Well, I think he only needs to go up to the University about twice a week; and it was going to be too expensive

TRISTAN STONE

living in Cambridge, anyway.”

“Fair enough,” said Kirsty.

“So, what do you make of the school?” I asked.

“Well, it is not the worst place in the world is it?”

“Very diplomatic, Araminta,” said Mum.

“Don’t think just because you went on a trip, that’s usual. It’s only the second one I’ve been on in three years!”

“Is that Tudor House open to the public?” asked Araminta in a business-like fashion.

“I’m not sure,” said Mum. “Well, it must be. I’m sure you can find out on the internet or something?”

“Why, did you want to go back?”

Araminta didn’t get to answer my question because her mobile rang at that precise moment. Excusing herself from the table to take the call, I caught Kirsty giving me looks and tried to prevent further merciless teasing by reminding her of her broken headphones.

“Mum?” I said, “I *was* right in thinking that Kirsty’s headphones were caught in the wash wasn’t I?”

“Yes, I’m afraid to say so, sweetheart.” Kirsty gave Mum a glare.

“I’m always telling you to check your pockets before you put anything in the wash. I’m sorry I don’t have the time to do that for you. Not with trying to hold down two jobs to support you. And before you ask me, you’ll have to wait till Saturday to get those replacement headphones. I just don’t have the cash at the moment. Sorry.”

“That’s okay Mum; of course. Thank you,” muttered Kirsty. The ‘thank you’ clearly being an afterthought. I knew what she’d do next - she’d offer to wash up to wheedle her way into Mum’s good books and to give

THE LESSER EVIL

Araminta the false impression that she's a human being and a good daughter and make me look like a lazy son. Then, later that evening, she'd have a 'girl' talk with Mum about how some scabby boy broke her heart and how she isn't pretty and is worried no one will ever marry her and compliment Mum's cooking and then, just as she's turning Mum's light out, she'll relent, instruct Kirsty to go to her cash box and take out a fiver:

"Will that be enough?" she'll ask.

"Oh, Mum, I couldn't!" Kirsty will feign in protest.

"It's OK, I want you to have it. Not much point in having an iPlayer if you can't use it, is there?"

"iPod, Mum. But thank you." Kirsty will let her voice quaver at just the last moment, indicating that £5 really isn't enough and Mum will tell her to take £15 in case and give her the change. Which she'll forget about.

"Don't tell Chris," Mum will say, knowing she can't afford to give me any money and thinking, mistakenly, that I'll be jealous. I won't be. I'm not that kind of person. I really don't care if Mum spends the occasional bit of money extra on my sister. It's the way Kirsty works around Mum that I don't like. Besides, I have my own money from my paper round.

Whilst all this was going round in my head, Araminta came back to the table and apologised. It seemed her parents were anxious to have her back home as it was dark.

"Of course!" said Mum, "I'm so sorry to have worried your parents. I'll give you a lift right away."

"I'm sorry. I hope you don't think me rude, Mrs Jones. It was lovely of you to invite me to stay and you make a

TRISTAN STONE

wonderful Bolognese!”

“That’s because I don’t put cinnamon in it. Are you two coming for the ride?” Mum asked. Before I could open my mouth to say yes, Kirsty said:

“Oh no, Mummy. We’ll stay and wash up, won’t we, Chris?” She only calls her ‘Mummy’ when she’s hatching a diabolical plan. So that scuppered it for me.

“Thanks, sweetheart. Oh and Chris, would you do the bins please? It’s Recycling tomorrow.”

I nodded my assent and, having retrieved her yellow raincoat (which looks like the one Gromit wears) from the rack, Araminta went to the front door.

“Well, I expect I’ll see you. Around.” I muttered, feebly.

“Don’t be stupid, Chris; Araminta wouldn’t be seen dead in your social circle! Lovely to have you round. I’ll see you tomorrow in English first period,” said Kirsty and deliberately gave Araminta a hug in front of me.

And that was it. The front door slammed, I didn’t get to see the “incredible Georgian property” the Stirlings lived in, (as Mum described it on her return journey) and, as you’ll have guessed, I ended up doing the washing up, too.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was a week or so later when Araminta came home to find the library completely turned out, with books strewn absolutely everywhere. At first, she was worried they had been burgled but there was no sign of forced entry, and then she heard her father speaking on the phone to somebody:

“Yes, I think I have it; at last!”

“Father?” Araminta called out, cautiously.

“Yes, Sweetheart, in here! Come in.”

Araminta followed the sound of her father’s voice and entered his Study. As ever, it was something of a mausoleum to the fruitless labours of academia: stuffy bits of yellowing paper with handwritten notes filled endless volumes, bound with bits of string in folders made from brown card. His favourite Mont Blanc pen in the ink well of a mahogany desk, the turntable on the sideboard playing Bach. Everything was as it had been throughout her childhood. Houses changed but there was always a Study. The addition of a computer in this one, and a rather hideous painting of a crow which had been left by the landlord hung on the wall opposite the bay window where

TRISTAN STONE

her Father stood, hand on hip. He turned around, noticing his daughter and smiled.

“Before you say anything, I know; it’s a terrible mess,” he said.

“I thought we’d been robbed!”

“It worries me that I wouldn’t notice if we had! Do sit down.” Araminta looked around for a clean chair in vain and her father darted forward to remove a pile of papers off the Chesterfield carver in the corner.

“I need you to do me a favour.” When Dr Stirling asked his daughter for ‘favours’, they were generally unfavourable and involved some sort of nefarious activity which wasn’t strictly legal. The first time was when Araminta was barely four years old and her father asked her to pick-pocket an old man for a scrap of paper he had been carrying. At the time, Araminta supposed it was a sort of game but she began to realise, over time, that there were certain moral lines her father didn’t mind crossing, as long as he didn’t have to risk being caught himself. Araminta might have thought this selfish, except she supposed that her father’s work must be truly important (for he never asked her to steal money or anything of financial value; it was always some form of reconnaissance and, more often than not, she was to put back what she had taken). Moreover, Araminta understood that if she were caught, a child was more likely to get off with a caution or slap on the wrists; besides which, Araminta took pride in the fact that she never *had* been caught and this alter-ego indulged her imagination.

“What is it, Father?” she asked.

He had taken his glasses off and was sucking the left arm at the bit that curled round behind his ear. It was a habit whenever deep in thought.

“Well, you know that Tudor House you visited? I’ve been doing some research and I think it is highly likely that there is something in that house.”

“What?”

THE LESSER EVIL

“I can’t tell you precisely; partly because I’m not sure myself and partly because I’m not ready to tell you all I know; but suffice it to say that whatever it is, or might lead us to, is potentially very dangerous and must be destroyed at all costs.” Araminta knew when her father was being serious and when not to probe further so she simply asked:

“How will I know where to find it or when I have?”

“Easy: Look for something that doesn’t belong there. And, sweetheart? Be careful. I don’t think we’re the only people who are onto this. Which also means, I’m afraid, time is of the essence.”