RILEY, Lucinda

**The Shadow Sister**

I will always remember exactly where I was and what I was doing when I heard that my father had died . . ." With my pen still suspended above the sheet of paper, I looked up at the July sun--or, at least, the small ray of it that had managed to trickle between the window and the red-brick wall a few yards in front of me. All of the windows in our tiny apartment looked onto its blandness, and despite today's beautiful weather, it was dark inside. So very different from my childhood home, Atlantis, on the shores of Lake Geneva. I realized I had been seated exactly where I was now when CeCe had come into our miserable little sitting room to tell me that Pa Salt was dead. I put down the pen and went to pour myself a glass of water from the tap. It was clammy and airless in the sticky heat and I drank thirstily as I contemplated the fact that I didn't need to do this--to put myself through the pain of remembering. It was Tiggy, my younger sister, who, when I'd seen her at Atlantis just after Pa died, had suggested the idea. "Darling Star," she'd said, when some of us sisters had gone out onto the lake to sail, simply trying to distract ourselves from our grief, "I know you find it hard to speak about how you feel. I also know you're full of pain. Why don't you write your thoughts down?" On the plane home from Atlantis two weeks ago, I'd thought about what Tiggy had said. And this morning, that's what I had endeavored to do. I stared at the brick wall, thinking wryly that it was a perfect metaphor for my life just now, which at least made me smile. And the smile carried me back to the scarred wooden table that our shady landlord must have picked up for nothing in a junk shop. I sat back down and again picked up the elegant ink pen Pa Salt had given me for my twenty-first birthday. "I will not start with Pa's death," I said out loud. "I will start when we arrived here in London--" The crash of the front door closing startled me and I knew it was my sister CeCe. Everything she did was loud. It seemed beyond her to put a cup of coffee down without banging it onto the surface and slopping its contents everywhere. She had also never grasped the concept of an "indoor voice" and shouted her words to the point where, when we were small, Ma was once worried enough to get her hearing tested. Of course, there was nothing wrong with it. In fact, it was the opposite--CeCe's hearing was overdeveloped. There was nothing wrong with me either when a year later Ma took me to a speech therapist, concerned at my lack of chatter. "She has words there, she just prefers not to use them," the therapist had explained. "She will when she's ready." At home, in an attempt to communicate with me, Ma had taught me the basics of French sign language. "So whenever you want or need something," she'd said to me, "you can use it to tell me how you feel. And this is how I feel about you right now." She'd pointed at herself, crossed her palms over her heart, then pointed at me. "I--love--you." CeCe had learned it quickly too, and the two of us had adopted and expanded what had begun as a means of communication with Ma to form our own private language--a mixture of signs and made-up words--using it when people were around and we needed to talk. We'd both enjoyed the baffled looks on our sisters' faces as I'd sign a sly comment across the breakfast table and we'd both dissolve into helpless giggles.

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