

THE SEVEN KEYS TRILOGY
BOOK ONE

DEMONS
AND
THIEVES

LYNDA BERGER

FULUJI'S PUBLISHING

One

The Accident

Sam wasn't concentrating. His eyes may have been on the road but his mind was elsewhere. Everything seemed to have gone wrong. The outing was supposed to have been a treat for both his grandsons, but Nick had managed to upset his younger brother, Tad, and found a way to be alone with his grandfather – yet again.

As his car shot across the junction, Sam caught a glimpse of the traffic light mocking him from the side. It was red. Too late, he stamped on the brake. The bus was upon him.

Time tumbled into a strange frame following the crash, somewhere between fast and forever. As the bus careered into a lorry, sandwiching Sam's car in between, he could only look on. Faces in the windows, screaming.

He didn't feel the explosion, nor the rage of the flames. He was high above them by then, skimming the clouds as something light pulled him away.



At home, Tad felt a jolt as if his insides had been wrenched from him, and he leant against a chair to steady himself. Perhaps he had a virus.

Outside, the dismal sky spilt tears down the misty glass. As he traced their pattern with his finger, his eyes fell on to a family photograph tucked into a corner of the windowsill. Picking it up he drifted over to the table and sat down, his mood sombre. He had let his grandfather down. His thoughts turned to his brother, Nick. If it hadn't been for him, Tad would have spent the day at the races instead of sulking over a stupid quarrel.

'They're not back yet, then?' His mother walked in laden down with shopping.

'No,' Tad replied.

'You should have gone, Tad.'

'Yeah, well. I had other things to do.'

Mrs Bailey hesitated, then took her coat out to the cupboard in the hallway.

Tad kicked the table leg. If only he hadn't let Nick get to him. But after his brother had insulted him on the internet, Tad hadn't wanted to go anywhere that involved being with him.

He glanced at the clock. They had been gone a long time – six hours now. Nick had probably persuaded his grandfather to take a detour on the way back. Typical.

He poured himself a glass of coke and turned on the radio. The local news caught his attention:

'Fifth Street in Bleakton has been closed due to a fire following a serious accident. All traffic is being diverted as emergency vehicles attend the scene.'

The doorbell rang. His mother must have answered it because minutes later he heard her anguished, unearthly howl. It would be the soundtrack of his nightmares for weeks afterwards.

And life, after that, would never be the same again.

Two

Two Years Later

Tad burst out of the house. He didn't care that a car had to swerve to avoid him, nor that the driver screamed abuse. He didn't even stop to help old Mrs Butterworth, who had just tripped over the kerb – and he was usually the first to go to her aid.

Hurting past the golf course, he headed down the deserted track towards Siren Forest. The murky woods loomed ahead, the boughs of ancient oaks and elms reaching out like tentacles. He swallowed, his throat a clenched fist as he fought back the bitter cocktail of grief and anger inside him. He knew he shouldn't be there at such a late hour, but he had to find Bo. Brushing the branches roughly aside he ran into the velvety depths of the forest.

Night was creeping in, changing light into shadows and beauty into ghostly shades that teased his imagination. But the images that were really burning through Tad's mind came from the scene he had just witnessed – playing over and over in his mind like a film on continuous replay...

'I'm leaving, do you hear?' his mother screamed as she ran up the stairs of their three-bedroomed house.

Mr Bailey flew out of the study and caught hold of his wife on the half-landing, his eyes bulging with fury. 'Don't you ever threaten me!' he spat, pulling her roughly towards him.

Mrs Bailey looked scared. She grabbed hold of the cold mug of tea that was perched on the windowsill beside her. 'Get away from me!' she cried, hurling the liquid into her husband's face.

Tad, watching from his bedroom door, stood horrified as the tea splashed across his father's face and then dripped onto his brand-new shirt. Mr Bailey stared at his wife, speechless. For a moment Tad wasn't sure what he was going to do. His father was prone to angry outbursts, but Mrs Bailey had never fought back like this.

For one long minute his father just stood there, as if crushed by his wife's action. Then silently he turned round, retreated downstairs to the sanctuary of his study and closed the door.

The baby was crying.

Tad's mother, visibly shaken and in tears, made her way to the top of the stairs.

She turned into the first bedroom and crossed over to the small, white cot in the corner. Bending over, she picked up her adopted daughter Ellie and placed her gently over her shoulder. 'It's time, baby girl. It's time,' she whispered, unaware of her thirteen-year-old son still watching from across the hallway.

Tad closed his door quietly and leant back on it, his head hung low. Although he'd been expecting – dreading – this moment for years, he was devastated. He had hoped and prayed that things might change, that his mother and father could somehow learn at least to like each other again.

But now he knew it was too late. They couldn't go back from here. They were finally splitting up.

He pulled out his rucksack from the space underneath his bed. It was already packed – jumper, wallet, phone, torch, matches, a bottle of water and biscuits, which were probably out of date now since he had prepared all this six months ago.

He slipped downstairs. The stereo was blasting away in his father's office. No one would hear. Opening the front door, he took one look back and ran out.



Tad's mind was racing. Life had been so hard recently, not just at home but at school too, what with all the bullying. Why couldn't he be bigger, taller? Then, perhaps, that gang of halfwits would leave him alone. It was almost as if he were cursed, he thought. 'But that's just stupid!' he muttered, shaking his head and running faster into the woods. The wet and muddy floor of the forest made a treacherous carpet beneath Tad's feet and it was no real surprise when he suddenly slipped. Falling heavily into some brambles, he finally came to a stop.

Disentangling himself from the thorns, Tad slowly stood up – he'd heard something. It was hard to focus with the approaching dark, but the sound was quite unmistakable. Several yards ahead of him, and clad in black helmets with matching black leathers, two motorcyclists were busy jumping a steep ditch and bouncing on to the opposite bank.

Tad stepped behind a tree and peered out. His heart was thumping. He mustn't be seen. Crouching close to the ground, he reached into his rucksack for his black jumper. As he tugged at the zip of his beige jacket and threw it off his

shoulders, the cold night air cut into his skin. He shivered. A short-sleeved tee-shirt hadn't been the best idea. Hurriedly, he pulled on the jumper, stuffed the jacket into his rucksack and looked back towards the ditch.

The second motorcyclist was there. But where was the first?

Nervous, he moved away from the tree, scanning the surrounding forest. To the right there was heather, an area full of rabbit burrows and foxholes; to his left, another exit to the road. Straight ahead was the ditch. Where had he gone? Tad frowned as he watched the straggling biker stop to adjust his helmet. Although he couldn't see him clearly, there was something about him – something familiar, but disturbing.

It was time to leave. He was about to step back when a sudden noise made him turn. His mouth went dry. A powerful light cast a ring around him and he felt a sickening rush of fear. It was the first bike. Instinctively, he pulled his arm up to shield his eyes.

The bike wasn't moving.

Pivoting on his foot, Tad made to run the other way. But another light blocked him. It was the second motorcyclist.

His legs, weak beneath him, froze as the engines revved an ominous duet. The bikers had found a new game. As the lights sped towards him, he dived to his right and headed for the heather.

Charging along the path, Tad glanced back. The bikers were weaving along a few feet behind him. Sweat poured down his brow. He had been in some tough situations before, but how was he going to get out of this one?

Racing forward, he darted off the track and into the heather. He had remembered something. Shuffling his rucksack over his shoulder he groped inside it, his fingers fumbling for his torch. His breath, short and hard, quickened as he pulled it out.

Flicking the switch, Tad swept it from side to side searching for the burrow where Bo had got hurt. He had marked it with a scarf tied to a small post dug into the heather.

There it was on his left.

He ran as close to it as he dared, then leapt suddenly to the right, rolling down the hill towards the fence.

The bikers didn't see it until it was too late. As their wheels struck the unexpected hole, they were hurled into the air, their bikes crashing down beneath them.

Tad didn't wait to see what happened next. He had seen it in all the movies – the hero should never go back.

No. He had a plan.

Somewhere by the fence, which separated the woods from a private estate, Bo had dug a tunnel under the barbed wire. If he could get there before the bikers recovered, perhaps he could lose them. He ran along the perimeter flashing his torch.

There!

He slipped to the ground and propped the wire up with his rucksack. It was slacker than it should have been – just enough room for him to slip through. With his chin held tight to his chest, he slithered on his back under the wire, lifting it above his jumper so that it wouldn't get caught.

Reaching the other side, he brushed himself down, snatched up his rucksack and ran into the open fields. He daren't stop now. The bikers might reappear at any moment.

Images of Bo, happily chasing rabbits, skittered through his mind as he darted across the open space. Was it only yesterday that he had disappeared? They had been walking in the forest when Bo had suddenly rushed off into the trees. He was used to the golden retriever's mischievous antics and had expected him to reappear as usual, covered in foul-smelling sludge from his favourite stagnant ditch.

But yesterday was different. Yesterday, Bo hadn't come back.

Tad had searched everywhere for his dog, putting notices on trees and up on lamp-posts near his house. His parents had even contacted the police and the local animal shelter, but no one had reported him found as yet. The only place he hadn't been able to look was on this private estate.

The sight of a farm just ahead interrupted his thoughts. As he ran towards it, the moon cast an eerie glow on the derelict buildings. At one end lay stables, which had solid roofs but were otherwise in a sad state of repair, as if someone had tried to renovate them and run out of money. At the other end, he could see the main building – covered in ivy with the windows boarded up.

He walked round to the front door. Part of him wanted to look inside; the other part was scared. Hesitantly, he gave it a push, expecting it to be locked. It opened – almost too quickly for his liking – gliding silently on its hinges. He shivered. This didn't feel good at all. But home was a long way back and he was really tired. So cautiously, he stepped inside.

The hallway of the cottage was empty apart from a wooden walking-stick that lay propped against the staircase. There was no sign of life; no sound, except for the carpet that squelched beneath his feet. The rain must have been flooding in under the front door for some time, Tad thought. Certainly no one could live there anymore; the smell of mould was awful.

To his right a door lay slightly ajar and Tad gingerly peeped in.

It was a strange room – a mix between a dining area, lounge and a bedroom. In front of the broken window, an old wooden table stood abandoned. On his left lay an old disused fireplace; to his right, an iron bed. It was still made up with sheets, blankets and pillows.

Tad strolled over and felt the covers, expecting damp.

Strangely, they were perfectly dry. Throwing his rucksack and trainers to the floor, he climbed in. He would just rest for a moment and get warm. Sliding down under the sheet, he stretched out his legs.

'Ouch!' Something was at the bottom. Reaching down, he found it between his feet. It felt smooth on one side and gritty on the other. Bringing it out of the covers, Tad held it under his torch.

It was a stone. On one side it looked polished and perfect; on the other, it was rough and dirty and covered in mud. He tried to clean it with a bit of spit and his sleeve, but the dirt wouldn't budge. It seemed ingrained. He leant back and studied it for a while, rolling it over and over between his fingers.

As he lay there, Tad felt anger and loneliness rise in his throat. He hated school and he hated home. The only good part of his life had been Bo. And now he was gone.

A solitary tear slipped down his cheek as he snuggled down into the bed. With the stone still held tightly in his palm, he gave way to exhaustion and succumbed to a deep, deep sleep.