



Miranda's Key

Theolyn Cortens



SOULSCHOOL
PUBLISHING

Miranda's Key

Copyright © 2016 Theolyn Cortens

Published by SoulSchool Publishing

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Acknowledgement

Cover photograph from Wikipedia under Creative Commons Licence.

Although every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the publisher and author assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Neither is any liability assumed for damages resulting from the use of this information contained herein.

For additional copies of this and other books please subscribe to Theolyn.com and download from the Free section of the website.

Further information: www.theolyn.com.

The moral right of the author has been asserted. All rights reserved.

My name is Miranda Spear. Last year I was twenty-one. At eight a.m. on my birthday came a knock on the door of my London flat that turned my life around. A Special Delivery from Williams and Clutterbuck, Solicitors, Banbury, established 1578. I was being summoned. Not by lawyers, but by a woman who had died over three hundred years ago.

Strictly speaking, it was ‘our’ flat. I was living with Rob, we were high-flying law students at London University. My ambition was to become Queen’s Counsel before my thirtieth birthday. Rob’s vision was a Cabinet post. That letter changed everything. I skipped classes and took the next train to Oxfordshire. Rob was immersed in his dissertation and couldn’t ‘afford’ the time. I never saw him again. I never went back to the flat. I never completed my degree.

* * * * *

“Miss Miranda Spear?”

The solicitor’s huge oak desk was overflowing with papers.

I nodded.

“Only child of William and Janet Spear who died in a car accident last summer?”

I nodded again. Grief after the loss of my parents, Rob claimed, was driving my work-obsessive life. Looking back, I know part of me was longing to stop.

“Sit down, Miss Spear,” said Mr. Williams, beaming over horn-rimmed glasses. “It is my pleasure to deliver a gift that our firm has guarded for generations.”

He shuffled to an ancient looking safe. I was trembling all over. A horrid feeling began to engulf me – something deep in my bones understood that my carefully planned future hung on a very thin thread.

It was such a tiny package, wrapped in yellowing paper, sealed with red wax and the letter S.

“Open it,” he prompted, gently.

A key. My name on the tag in old script:

Miranda’s Key.

“This will open a box which was locked in 1629. It’s stored at Deane House, Warwickshire. The custodians are the National Trust who will give you free access to your legacy.”

By teatime, I was in an Elizabethan manor house, opening the antique box that contained a story. A tale of loss and sadness that transformed my thinking about who I was, where I had come from and what I wanted to do with my life.

My name is Miranda Jenkins. As a child I lived in a house with a thick oak door. I remember three particular occasions when knocking came on that door. On each occasion my life changed: the first time for the better, the second for the worse, and on the last occasion you, beloved reader, must decide. Each knocking heralded a great transformation, and each time a significant word echoed through my days.

The first knocking came on my birthday. The sun was setting and I was in my room, tidying my doll’s cradle. I heard voices on the stairs. Aunt Anne was calling my father:

“Henry! Dr. Dee has arrived!”

I tingled with excitement. I knew about Dr. Dee, the Queen’s astrologer. Although I was only eleven years old, my father had taught me mathematics and I could calculate horary charts to answer everyday questions. And I was proficient in classical languages: Latin, Greek and Hebrew. So when I crept up the stairs to listen at the library door I understood the mysterious words that Dr. Dee was declaiming: angelus, angelos, malakh... Angel. They were talking about Angels. How would I ever forget?

Anne came out of the room and smiled at me.

“You must come to be, sweet girl. I’ll bring you camomile, otherwise your clever brain will never settle.”

My father’s sister grew herbs and our neighbours relied on her remedies. But she had not been able to save my mother’s life when I was born. Anne had dressed me in a cambric nightgown embroidered by my mother, whose name I was given. A wet nurse was hired to suckle me and I grew into a

sturdy child, well loved and protected from harm. How could I know the word 'Angel' would herald dramatic changes in my life?

After Dr. Dee's visit, my father became obsessed with Angels. He taught me their names: Gabriel, Auriel, Raphael, Michael. Father's wool trade was already secure, but we grew noticeably richer and the main house was extended. A large cottage was built for Anne, who created a physic garden and shared herbal wisdom with local women. It was the Angels, my father said, who helped his business thrive. Anne agreed, she said it was Raphael, the Divine Physician, who was her teacher. Her reputation grew and people came from many counties to receive free advice and herbal remedies.

At eight o'clock in the evening I called Rob from my mobile. He was not available. So I left a message: the first of several. I told him I had amazing news. I would call again. I never did get to speak to him. Somehow, while I had been reading that story, all connection to my old life had dissolved.

The second knocking was on May Day, four years later. I came home late in the morning, after dancing on the green. I was wearing a woven straw hat, laden with cowslips and bluebells. I ran upstairs to change my grass stained petticoat. Knock, knock, knock... it seemed urgent. Anne was in her cottage. Eventually our cook Grace opened the door. I leaned over the banister, gazing down on the grey-haired visitor who spoke to my father. It was Harry Timpson, father's book-keeper and a member of the Angel circle.

"Secret", he said, "It must be secret."

After that visit my father became withdrawn and morose. He methodically labelled his diaries, precise records of his conversations with Angels, and packed them in boxes. One day I crept in to the library, which had once been a haven of spiritual excitement. Father looked up sadly:

"Dr. Dee, a faithful Christian and England's greatest genius, is accused of wickedness, so our spiritual research must be hidden. Even Anne's herbal wisdom may be misunderstood. We live in dark times and our knowledge must be kept secret."

That word echoed through our house. 'Secret'. From then on, like-minded visitors came rarely, and only under cloak of darkness. Anne's garden was planted with turnips; she became sad and grey, like my father. The cottage windows were left unwashed and cobwebs grew around the doors. In the autumn of 1606 my dear aunt passed away and we knew her broken heart had summoned the Angel of Death to her bedside.

The woman from the National Trust took me to see the cottage. The path was made of bricks in a herringbone pattern; on each side of the path were neat lawns and low box hedges. There were no herbs to be seen.

“The last of the Jenkins family died in 1980 and the property came into our care. The will contained an old bequest, dated 1629. The heir to the estate was a Miss Miranda Spear, if she could be found. Since then, lawyers have been looking for anyone by that name, whose lineage would comply with the bequest. So here you are.”

Lineage? What lineage might this be? How could someone bequeath me something, when I hadn't been thought of, let alone born? I had been thinking of ancestors and descendants a lot recently, after the death of my parents and the confirmation by a pregnancy kit that I was expecting Rob's baby. I hadn't told him. My termination appointment at the Marie Stopes clinic was booked for the next day, Friday at 1:30pm. The decision had seemed like the only option. But I was here, and someone from the past seemed to be redesigning my future.

When I was eighteen years of age, my father died and I inherited a house in great need of repair, six acres, and Anne's untended cottage. On the afternoon after the funeral, Harry Timpson came to advise me of the financial affairs. But we were interrupted, by knocking at the door. The bailiffs seized furniture and valuables, to clear outstanding debts. If the sale of these proved insufficient, they would take a lien on the house.

“There must be a mistake”, I whispered.

Harry put his arm around me.

“I am sorry. It's true. I wanted to explain before they arrived.”

Harry comforted me. Twice. First, he explained that my father's cousins

would take a peppercorn lease on the house. This would satisfy the creditors, allowing me to live in the cottage. Then he made love to me. He was almost old enough to be my father, and he had a good wife. Was this wrong? It did not feel so at the time. It was beautiful and reassuring. Two months later I realised I was with child and I wondered whether 'mistake' was the new word that would echo in my head.

Alone in the cottage, I opened a pile of letters, a diary and a book. Miranda Jenkins and Alice Spear had written to each other for twenty years. Alice was Harry Timpson's sister. She had adopted Miranda's baby, William. Miranda kept fair copies of all her letters. In the last, written a few days before she died, she asked Alice to pass on a request to William. If he ever had a daughter he should name her Miranda. If not, this request should be passed down through the generations until, eventually, a daughter would be born in the Spear family and named Miranda.

In the last of her diary entries Miranda wrote:

I have gleaned information from fixed stars and moving planets. I see no female descendant until the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-nine. I leave a bequest for this girl, Miranda Spear, to be inherited when she reaches the age of twenty-one. Then she may take ownership of my cottage and use the garden as Anne would have desired.

The light was fading as I turned the pages of Anne's herbal, illustrated with fine botanical drawings. My skin prickled, my hands and feet tingled. There were invisible presences in that room: my ancestress Miranda, her aunt Anne – and another. Two of Miranda's words were echoing in my own life. An Angel watched as I read Anne's secrets. I knew for certain I was being offered a choice.

And so, before the third word could take power, I 'phoned the clinic and cancelled my appointment. Later last year I brought my baby, William, back to the cottage. As I proudly showed him my new physic garden, the sunset reflected golden light on the cottage windows and I knew Anne's Angel of healing was reassuring me.

I had not made a mistake.