



BRIAN KEANEY

JACOB'S
LADDER

THERE ARE A MILLION WAYS TO THE BOTTOM OF
JACOB'S LADDER BUT ONLY ONE WAY TO THE TOP.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Keaney was born in London of Irish parents. He grew up listening to his mother telling stories and he made up his mind at an early age that he wanted to be a writer.

Brian says of *Jacob's Ladder*, 'I have always known there is a world that lies just beyond the borders of this one, and one day I woke up with the feeling that I wanted to explore that other place, to find the stories that are waiting in the darkness.'

RAVE REVIEWS FOR BRIAN KEANEY'S BOOKS:

'If books were made malleable, *Jacob's Ladder* would have the impressions of fingerprints moulded deep within its pages! Imaginative and inventive... Brian Keaney has written a book that is not only life-affirming, but also life-enhancing. *Jacob's Ladder* is, in short, a tremendous book!'
Jake Hope – Young People's Library Services

'I've never read a book like it.
I couldn't put it down – I read it in a day!'
Poppy, 12 yrs old

Excellent. A brilliant read!
Teen Titles

A thoughtful and exciting read.
Books for Keeps

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CONTENTS

1. VIRGIL	7
2. LOCUS	17
3. THE STONE FIELDS	33
4. GHOSTS	45
5. THE GIRL IN THE COURTYARD	57
6. AYSHA'S DREAM	67
7. THE OTHER SIDE	76
8. MAKING CONTACT	87
9. CALVIN'S STORY	102

10. THE ROAD TO NOWHERE	109
11. THE DEDANIM	121
12. A VOICE IN THE WIND	136
13. NEMAIN	149
14. THE VALLEY OF BONES	163
15. IN THE HEART OF THE HILL	178
16. THE PALACE OF REMEMBRANCE	191
17. BIRDSONG	202

1. VIRGIL

Jacob's eyes twitched open and he became aware that he was lying on the ground with his face pressed against the earth. Rather stiffly he sat up and looked around. He was in the middle of an enormous field. There was cropped grass beneath him, dotted here and there with tiny white flowers which seemed almost to glow in the twilight. Ahead of him, in the distance, he could see a line of trees. Nothing was moving in any direction.

What was he doing here?

He tried to remember how he had got there and why he had been lying on the ground, fast asleep, but there seemed to be nothing in his mind, absolutely nothing, as if he had opened the cupboard of his memory and found it entirely empty.

Anxiously he looked all round, hoping he would see something that would remind him of what he had been doing before he had fallen asleep, but there was nothing to see, just grass on three sides, the line of trees ahead of him and, above, a huge expanse of sky the colour of bruised flesh. He

didn't like the look of that sky. It seemed to be full of a dull menace.

Fear began stealing over him, like ice-cold water seeping through his veins. He must be able to remember something, he told himself. He sat very still and concentrated. Think! How did you get here?

But it was no good.

He stood up, feeling the need to stem the rising tide of panic threatening to overwhelm him. He made his hands into fists and held them out in front of him, squeezing them hard, as if physical force would calm him. It'll be all right in a minute, he told himself. Just be patient. It'll come back to you. Let's see, what do you know?

His name was Jacob. OK. What next?

Nothing.

That was it. That was the only thing he could remember. His name was Jacob. He put his hands on his head and tugged at his hair. This wasn't possible. He had to be able to remember something. If he could just summon up the smallest scrap, he was certain that everything else would come tumbling back. If he could just make a start.

He looked down at his clothes. He was wearing blue trousers, a green T-shirt and white shoes. Both the trousers and the T-shirt had irregular brown patches on them. He felt certain they were his clothes but he did not remember them.

Then something did stir, very deep in his mind, so deep that it was like the faintest whisper in an enormous cavern. What was it? His will stretched out to grasp it, like a blind man reaching for a candle, and suddenly he had it. He knew what it was; but with a dreadful sense of disappointment, he realised it was no more than a feeling, not a concrete fact. It was simply a conviction that he had lost something. Not just his memory. Something different. Before he had lost his memory, he felt certain that he had lost something else. But he had no idea what it was. He sighed. This was no good at all.

What was he going to do? He had to get some help, that was obvious. He needed to find someone who knew where he was, someone who could tell him what he ought to do next. Wait a minute! What about his...? What were they called? The man and woman who looked after him? What did you call them? There was a word for it. He felt like stamping his foot in frustration.

He found this inability to even remember the word for the people who looked after him deeply distressing. He tried to picture them in his mind but he couldn't. Would he even recognise them if he saw them again? If he met them right now? This was terrible. How could he possibly have got into this condition?

Well, it was no good staying here in the field and waiting

for it to get dark, or for a storm to come, which by the look of things might not be all that long. He had to do something. He needed to get out of here. But which way should he go? He turned slowly in a complete circle, feeling hopelessly indecisive, but as he came round to face the trees again, he thought he noticed something moving in the distance. He looked more carefully and now he was certain that a man was walking towards him. He felt an immense surge of relief. Someone was coming to help him. Immediately he set off to meet him.

The man had clearly seen Jacob and was walking rapidly, so it was not long before the two of them drew near. Now Jacob could see him more clearly he noticed that the man was wearing some sort of uniform, a grey tunic and grey trousers, and he found this reassuring. This was obviously someone in authority. He would know what to do.

The stranger stopped when he was still some distance away. He was tall and thin with short dark hair and an unsmiling face. He gave a slight nod when Jacob reached him. 'I've come to collect you,' he said.

'Thank you,' Jacob replied and he meant it. He really did feel grateful that someone had come to collect him. The burden of understanding would now be taken away from him. The man in the grey uniform would be able to explain what was happening.

'Where am I?' Jacob asked.

'In the field,' the man told him.

'How did I get here?'

'Don't bother about that now. Just come with me.'

'But I can't remember anything,' Jacob explained.

'Don't worry,' the man assured him. 'It's perfectly normal.'

'What do you mean, normal?'

'No one ever remembers anything when they wake up in the field.'

'Why not?'

'That's just the way it is. There's no point in making a fuss. Just come with me.' With that, the man turned on his heel and began walking back in the direction he had come.

Jacob hesitated. He was beginning to have his doubts about this man. The answers he had given were not at all satisfactory but Jacob couldn't just let him walk away, so he ran after him. 'Where are we going?' he asked.

'To the river,' the man replied.

'What river?'

'The river on the other side of those trees.'

'Why are we going there?'

'You'll see.'

'But can't you tell me now?'

The man shook his head. 'It isn't far,' he said. 'Just be patient.' He didn't look at Jacob when he spoke. Instead he

kept his eyes firmly fixed on the line of trees ahead.

Jacob studied him more closely as they walked along, trying to decide what sort of a person he was. Was he good? Or bad? Was it wise to trust him? He simply didn't know. The man's face was lined and there was a sternness about his features, as if he was more used to giving orders than answering questions. But he seemed to know what he was doing. Besides, what else could Jacob do? If he didn't follow this man, he would be left on his own and he couldn't bear the thought of that.

As he was thinking this, Jacob noticed a badge or symbol on the man's tunic. It seemed to be a head with two faces, each pointing in a different direction. It didn't hold any meaning for him and he was tempted to ask what it stood for, but there were so many other questions filling his mind that he dismissed it.

They had reached the trees by now and, without checking his pace, the man stepped into the wood with Jacob close behind. The trees grew very tall and straight, with smooth, slender trunks like pillars. Far above Jacob's head the leafy canopy cut out what little light there was, so that it was almost as dark as night in here and noticeably colder.

'You haven't told me your name,' Jacob pointed out.

'Virgil,' the man replied. He spoke almost too quietly for Jacob to hear, as if it pained him to release this information.

'How did you know I was going to be in the field?'

'It's my job to know.'

'What is your job, exactly?'

'Right now it's collecting you.'

'Yes but when you're not doing that, what do you do then?'

'None of your business.'

He spoke curtly, as if Jacob's enquiry had offended him. But why? Surely Jacob was only asking a reasonable question? The trouble was, he couldn't be sure what was reasonable because he couldn't remember anything. 'Look, I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm not trying to be nosy. I just don't understand. I'm trying to make sense out of things.'

'I've already told you. Just be patient,' Virgil replied.

But Jacob couldn't be patient. 'You said it was normal for me not to remember anything,' he went on.

'That's right.'

'So that must mean I'm not the only one you've found in the field.'

A faint smile flickered over Virgil's lips. Then it was gone again. 'That's true,' he agreed. 'You're not the first. Won't be the last, either, I shouldn't think.'

'So how do people get there in the first place?'

'I can't answer that.'

'Why not?'

'Because I can't. Now listen, any minute now we'll be out on the other side. The river's right in front as you come out through the trees, so mind yourself.'

Jacob soon saw that Virgil was right. It was already getting lighter and the trees were thinning out. A few minutes later they were in the open again and directly in front of them was a huge expanse of dark brown water.

Virgil turned left and continued walking along a narrow path between the trees and the river. There was only room for them to go in single file now so Jacob followed close behind. On his right, the shallow water was choked with reeds and grasses and it was hard to tell exactly where dry land ended and the river began. Stagnant pools had formed between the smooth black rocks that stuck out of the riverbed and the dense vegetation of the bank; an oily sheen glittered on their surface. But further out the water was flowing freely and moving with the force of a considerable current.

Virgil turned and looked over his shoulder at Jacob. 'Here we are,' he said.

Jacob saw that they had arrived at a stone platform projecting a little way out into the water. A wooden rowing boat was tied up at the end. Virgil led the way along the platform and got into the boat. He looked expectantly at Jacob. 'Come on,' he said. 'We've got to get across before nightfall.'

Jacob hesitated. He didn't feel entirely confident about

stepping into the boat. 'Is it safe?' he asked.

'Of course it's safe,' Virgil told him. 'Do you think I'd get in if it wasn't?'

Cautiously, Jacob stepped into the boat and sat down. Virgil untied the mooring rope. Then, picking up the oars, he pushed the boat away from the platform and began to row. The oars dipped into the water and were lifted clear again with mechanical regularity. Further out the water was no longer brown but almost black, reflecting the purple sky above.

Jacob found himself thinking once again about the man and woman who looked after him, whatever they were called. They would be wondering where he was right now, he felt sure of that. They would be worried about him. This thought was so strong, it was almost like a physical pain.

'There are some people who need to know I'm here,' he said. Again he struggled for the word. Suddenly it came to him. 'Parents,' he said. 'That's the word I was trying to think of. My parents. Someone should tell them. They'll be worrying.'

'Everyone knows who needs to know,' Virgil assured him.

'Are you certain about that?'

'I wouldn't say so if I wasn't.'

'But you've only just found me,' Jacob said. 'I don't see how they could have been told where I was.'

'Look, I knew where you were, didn't I?'

'Yes.'

‘Well then. It’s all in hand. All you have to do is stop fretting and let me get on with rowing this boat.’

It was clear that he was not going to provide any more information so Jacob had to content himself with watching the trees behind them recede and the opposite bank gradually come closer. After a while he could make out buildings on the other side and his spirits began to rise. ‘Do I live over there?’ he asked.

Virgil nodded. ‘Why do you think I’m taking you there?’ he asked.

What a relief! Virgil was bringing him back to where he lived. Soon he would see his parents and perhaps there would be other people who knew him. They would probably be delighted to see him. They would explain everything. They would help him remember what had happened. For the first time since waking in the field, Jacob began to relax. His ordeal would soon be over.

He sat back in the boat and allowed one hand to trail in the water. But immediately he took it out again. The water was numbingly cold. He shook his fingers and put them under his armpit to warm them. Virgil saw what he was doing and gave another of his grim smiles. ‘Colder than you expected?’ he asked.