

Divine Comedy

ELIZABETH PEWSEY



SCEPTRE

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Children of Chance

Prologue S

Where was this?

Quinta rubbed at the window. The coach was standing in a bay, with its engine off. Two tired-looking men in uniform conferred by a sign urging readers to Keep Up With *The Times*. A cigarette glowed briefly in the dark.

Quinta yawned, and stretched to ease her back. She looked at her watch. Quarter to twelve. They weren't in Scotland, that was hours away yet.

She went to the front of the coach and stood in the door, shivering slightly. The northern air was cool; she was used to southern warmth.

One of the uniformed men looked towards her.

'Where are we?' she asked.

'Eyot,' said the man. 'Didn't you notice the Cathedral when we crossed the bridge? All lit up? Didn't think anyone had to ask where this was, everybody knows the Cathedral.'

Eyot, thought Quinta. It might be a good idea. If they traced her to the bus station and found she'd booked for Scotland, then they wouldn't bother to search for her south of the border.

'I don't care about cathedrals,' she said. 'Can I get my luggage out?'

'Your ticket's for Edinburgh.' Grumbling faintly, the driver bent to open the luggage hold at the side of the coach.

'I'm not feeling very well. I'll go on in the morning.'

The other man glanced at her. 'You look poorly. Get yourself a good night's sleep somewhere. You can use that ticket tomorrow, no problem, I'll stamp it for you. There.'

She'd be all right, neat clothes, good luggage, not on drugs, no seedy boyfriend in tow.

'Expecting,' said the driver laconically, as Quinta walked slowly away, one shoulder humped up against the weight of her bag.

'You think so? Poor kid, doesn't look old enough.'

'You can always tell. I can, anyway; Margaret used to look like that early on. She'll be okay, that one. She's the sort who's got family, you can see. Ten to, Mick, on your way.'

Quinta blinked as she came out of the gloom of the bus station and into the light streaming from the floodlights around the Cathedral, which was visible above the rooftops. She set off towards the lights; there were always bed and breakfast places near tourist attractions. Her heels clattered on the cobbles of the narrow lane which seemed to run in the right direction.

School shoes, thought Quinta. Sensible shoes with reinforced heels, click-clack up and down the polished wooden floors.

The lane led to the Cathedral green. Quinta stopped and lowered her bag to the ground. Her eyes were drawn up to the soaring buttresses, the mass of the choir and the spire. The windows of the nave glowed eerily under the floodlights.

'Hello, God,' said Quinta. 'Remember me?'

Tears trickled down beside her nose, and she brushed them angrily away with the back of her hand.

'I don't think God's at home,' said a voice behind her. Quinta turned swiftly round. A tall, thin girl stood there, dark brown hair framing a bony but amiable face.

Quinta flushed. 'I was just being silly,' she said.

'I know,' said the girl. 'It gets you, that place, doesn't it? Smack in the solar plexus. You okay? You don't look it.'

Quinta pulled out a neat white handkerchief, name-taped in blue, capital letters, with surname followed by initials, not more than two, and also the girl's school number. She gave her nose a good blow, sniffed, and tried to pull herself together.

'I need a B & B,' she said. 'Not expensive,' she added quickly.

'They won't like you turning up at this time of night, by yourself, not the Eyot landladies,' said the girl. 'My name's Harriet, by the way.'

'I'm Quinta. Won't any of them not mind?'

'You could be lucky. But you can stay with me, if you don't mind a floor.'

Quinta turned her big round eyes full on Harriet. She hesitated for a moment, all the warnings of parents, teachers, elders, ringing in her ears.

'Thank you, I don't mind a floor at all.'

The voices vanished, she was beyond the reach of all those wise mentors now; she was on her own. Despite everything, the thought was cheering. She pulled at her bag, but Harriet took it from her.

'I'll carry it for a bit, you look all in. I'm much stronger than I look, I run a lot. Long distance, cross country, that kind of thing.'

Quinta followed her across the green, through an ancient arch and down another narrow, twisting street. Gradually the picturesque streets gave way to straighter lines of Victorian terraces. Harriet stopped by one, swung open a gate, and pushed Quinta in front of her.

'Don't make a noise. We don't want to wake Ma Hoodley up, she's the landlady, nosy old dink.'

They crept into a narrow hallway. Harriet inserted a key into the second door, which blocked off the stairs, and led the way up.

'In here. Mattress under the bed. I'll get some bedclothes for you.'

She was back in no time, pushed the foot of the mattress under the table, and slung a sheet over it.

'I'll do this, you don't look very competent at the moment. Bathroom's the door opposite. The other door is Jessica's room. Don't disturb her in the morning, she's a nurse, on nights, she needs her sleep. I'll be off early, I go to the library. I won't wake you; I'll be back about eleven.'

Ten minutes later, her aching back rested, Quinta shut her eyes, waiting for the nightly visitations of fear and panic to come stalking into her head. Two minutes later, for the first time in days, she was soundly asleep.

1 S

'Bye, Mum.'

'Hold on, Phoebe, your strap's loose.'

Quinta pulled the schoolbag strap through its buckle and bent down to kiss the wild red hair. 'You haven't brushed it,' she began, but Phoebe was off down the street.

Quinta looked out and waved to the man who was waiting for Phoebe. He returned the wave, and called to her: 'Shan't be back until tomorrow evening; you'll have to pick Phoebe up from school today.'

'Not from school,' Phoebe shouted. 'I'm going to Louise's; pick me up from Louise's house!'

Quinta nodded and waved again. She heard the phone ringing and went quickly back inside.

'Quinta? It's Simon. Is Alban there?'

'You've just missed him. He's going to London.'

'He said he was catching the eight thirty-nine. Why has he left so early?'

'He's taking Phoebe to school first.'

'Well, if he rings you . . .'

'He won't, he never does.'

'He might. If he does, tell him to ring me, will you? It's about the meeting. And, Quinta, if Alban's away, can I come tonight?'

'No, of course not. It's Tuesday, you can't come on a Tuesday.'

'But if Alban isn't going to be there?'

'It makes no difference.'

'I can just drop in for a few minutes . . . I could help Phoebe with her practice.'

'She doesn't need help with her practice, she's got to learn to do it on her own. No, Simon, the answer is still no.'

Quinta put the phone down, and stood in the hall for a moment. Then she shook herself and went through the inner door. She put her head round the door of Phoebe's room, winced, and shut it again. Coffee, she thought. Coffee, quick breakfast, then I can be in early, miss the traffic. And Phoebe going to Louise's meant no rush at the end of the day.

Good, Quinta said to herself as she clashed the dishes together in the sink. No Alban, either. Not that she minded her duty nights with him, but an extra evening off was a relief, she had to admit. A perfect gent, too, Alban; he never asked her to make up the nights she had off for one reason or another.

Altogether, thought Quinta, as she hunted under the sink for the washing-up liquid, altogether she had been very lucky to bump into Alban the way she had.

'Literally bumped into him, I expect,' practical Harriet had said, eyeing her very visible bump. Kind Harriet, who had found her work, held her hand through a tough labour and carried her through the tiredness and depression of the subsequent weeks. Kind Alban, who had employed her as a housekeeper when she was too pregnant to carry on as a waitress in the Garibaldi Cafe where he came to eat several times a week.

'I can't cook,' Quinta had said doubtfully. 'And I was never very good at domestic science at school.'

'Can't be worse than me,' said Alban. 'You have a merry face and a pleasing voice, and brains too, I wouldn't be surprised, when you aren't awash with hormones and blind with tiredness. I'll buy you a cookbook. Italian food, that's the thing. I love Italian food.'

He had remained unshocked when he found out how young she was; worse things can happen, he'd remarked cheerfully. He had waited until Quinta had grown up in all sorts of ways, and Phoebe was a tantrum-ridden three-year-old before inviting her into his bed.

Quinta had accepted. From gratitude. From a longing to be hugged. From a need to be comforted when she cried in the night. From physical desire: Alban was a vital man, with an amused smile and sensual hands. From friendship.

But not, as Alban quickly came to realize, from love or passion.

Why aren't I in love with him? Quinta asked herself as she briskly tackled the washing up. She liked the bubbles foaming in the sink; she always put in far too much washing-up liquid. It drove Alban into a frenzy.

'Such waste!'

'It's only soap. Look at the paper you waste, those big sheets of music manuscript paper, they cost a fortune. And you hurl them into the bin with just one note on the top of the page, quite unnecessary.'

'That's art,' grumbled Alban. 'Whereas the washing-up liquid, well, wanton waste makes wicked want.'

Quinta stacked the plates on the rack on the draining board, retrieved the towel from beneath Alban's large black cat and wiped her hands.

List, where was her list? Tuesday. It was Tuesday the first. Phoebe had woken her up chanting, 'White rabbits, white rabbits, white rabbits'; she firmly believed that if you did that on the first of the month, something exciting was bound to happen in the next thirty days. I hope not, thought Quinta. She wanted an organized and orderly life, much safer that way. No excitement, no corresponding horrors.

She looked at her list for Tuesday the first.

Phoebe – remember library book. Had she? Too late now, if she hadn't; she'd know when she got yet another note from Phoebe's teacher about the importance of the weekly library period . . .

Phoebe – tea with Louise. That was all right.

Alban, London. Yes.

Cat food. She could get that on the way home.

Van – see about squealing and clanking noises under the bonnet. No, not today, it could wait until tomorrow. She found a pencil and drew a line through that one.

Quite an empty day, really. An ordinary day.

An early day. Quinta arrived at work fifteen minutes before her usual time. She drove the van through the archway beside the shop and rummaged in her bag for the keys. She found the back door had been unlocked already, but it was still difficult

to open. Hinges need oiling, thought Quinta, giving it an extra hard shove; put it on a list.

Quinta loved the smell that met her as she opened the door: varnish and wood and resin and polish and glue. You stopped noticing it almost immediately; Quinta breathed deeply to get her fix before her nose got used to it. She hung her tweedy jacket on the big hook beside Gustav's raincoat. It might be summer, but a chill June had followed on months of grey cold and wet; no question of going out without a coat or jacket.

Gustav's raincoat hung on the next hook; it had hung there for as long as she had worked for him. He never wore it. 'Likes to have it,' Sam had explained. 'Thinks it makes him into an English gent. Feels uncomfortable in it, of course, not his style at all, but he likes to know it's there. Cost a bomb, too.'

Quinta made her way along the unlit passage, carefully avoiding the hunks of wood which narrowed its width to about eighteen inches of clear space. Visitors were always amazed that the glowing instruments in the showroom upstairs could ever have started life as such unpromising pieces of grey and dirty-looking timber.

Sam was already there, pulling up the shop blinds and removing the leaflets which sat rather forlornly on the dark velvet display stands and tables in the window cabinets.

'Throw the lights, love,' he called to Quinta. 'I'm just giving this window a quick once-over; the dust from the outside! I can't tell you.'

'Same as yesterday in the window?' asked Quinta.

'No, Gustav left a message, he wants that new baroque cello from Germany in here. And I'm going to do an arrangement with the student violins over there, he's got someone from the *Gazette* wants a piccy; they're doing a feature about school music.'

'I'll leave you to it, then,' said Quinta. 'Coffee?'

'Naturally,' said Sam. 'Although I read in a mag last night at the hairdressers that coffee is death to the complexion, gives you dark rings under the eyes.'

'Life does that,' said Quinta cheerfully. 'Don't worry, Sam. your complexion's fine.'

'Should be, too, with the trouble I take. No sugar, I'm on a diet.'

Quinta brought Sam his coffee, picked up the pile of post which had just slid through the letter box, and went back upstairs. She put her coffee down on the workbench, yawned, stretched and idly turned the radio on. The nine o'clock news. Floods, plagues, famines; woe, thrice woe. Another day, thought Quinta, looking at her list. Replace a bridge, no. 4312, soundpost crack, estimate first; school cello, new pegs needed . . .

' . . . new Bishop of Eyot,' said the voice on the radio. 'The previous bishop was forced to resign after police allegations . . .'

Quinta yawned again, and twiddled the tuning knob. ' . . . a new work by Harrison Birtwistle . . .'

 This time she reacted more quickly, and turned it off with a defiant click.

Sam's footsteps sounded on the stairs. 'Have you got a sixteenth violin up here? I'm sure we've got one, but I just can't lay my hands on it.'

'Over there,' said Quinta, wrapping her big white apron round herself. 'It lacked a string.'

'Busy day?' asked Sam, looking over her shoulder at her list.

'Not really,' said Quinta. 'Just the usual.'

'Time you stopped mending and started making,' said Sam, pausing in the doorway with the miniature violin in his hand. 'You're an artist, I can tell. And think how pleased Gustav would be.'

Quinta looked at him in astonishment. 'Oh, I don't think so,' she said. 'He employs me to do repairs and to rehair bows. He'd be horrified if I started making instruments.'

'Time someone did,' said Sam, shrugging his shoulders. 'He won't again, not with his arthritis. And there's that wood downstairs, going to waste. He employed you because you can make instruments, you've had all the training, lucky you. He loved your diploma piece, he told me so.'

'He's never said anything about it to me.'

'He wouldn't, would he? Not Gustav. I mean, if you're content to piddle around patching up other people's work, he's not going to stop you.'

'No, but he'd soon stop me if I started making a violin or a cello,' said Quinta. 'You know how high his standards are.'

'Your choice, duckie,' said Sam. 'No-one can force you. But

use it or lose it, that's what I say. If you don't make something soon, you'll find you've forgotten how.'

Quinta frowned. 'Very few people can make good instruments.'

'Yes, and if they all took your attitude, no-one would ever make one at all. It's being a woman, that's your trouble. You think little Phoebe's creation enough, but she'll grow up like lightning and off she'll go. While you'll still be here stringing fifty-pound violins. Oh well, your funeral, ducks; forget I spoke.'

'Sam,' began Quinta, but he had gone, with a cry of, 'Customer, I hear a customer.'

Quinta worked on diligently, her skilful fingers peacefully occupied, her mind much less peaceful. She enjoyed her work, and was good at it. She had been well trained, and had come with a glowing recommendation from the college. I'm lucky to have this job, she thought. Eyot was famous for its musical shops; musicians and dealers came from Europe and America to show and buy and sell, but once people came to work in the shops here, they stayed, and there were rarely any vacancies.

Gustav's shop was small, but very well thought of. The violins and cellos in the top showroom were all of the very finest, and worth a small fortune. And Gustav didn't turn away the routine repair work; he knew that as the small violinists and cellists grew, their ambitious parents would pay more and more for each instrument, moving on from factory-made Chinese to East European, to nineteenth-century German and French, and perhaps on to the serious five or six thousand pound ones. Then, if they eventually became professionals, they would buy even more valuable instruments; or as teachers, they would recommend Gustav's shop to students and parents . . .

Quinta went to the door and called down the stairs to Sam. He appeared a few minutes later.

'Anyone in the shop?' Quinta asked.

'No. It's always quiet at this time of the year, with Gustav away. How can I help?'

'I need to shift these clamps,' said Quinta. 'They're a bit awkward. Could you give me a hand?'

A smile flashed across Sam's dark face. He smoothed his hands down over his tight polo-necked shirt.

'Sure, great, Quinta. You know I love to use my muscles, makes all the time I spend working out in the gym worthwhile. Show me what you want done. Then I think it's time for another coffee.'

'Already?' said Quinta, surprised. The Cathedral clock chimed the half hour, and she looked at her watch. 'Goodness, you're right, it's half past eleven.'

'How time flies when you're hard at work,' said Sam.

More than 200 miles away in Oxford, others were not working so hard.

'Quick. Wake up, wake up!'

Lydia opened one eye, slowly, and closed it rapidly.

'It's half past eleven. I've come to say goodbye, I must rush, my train's at ten to twelve. I'll see you in London when you get back; lucky you, Angus to drive you home, then off to Greece, while it's slave, slave for me all summer. Oh, there's a note for you, from the devoted Angus, it was in your pigeonhole. Bye!'

The door slammed. Lydia plumped up her pillow behind her head. How quiet it was. Most of her year had already left, Finals over, just the last balls to enjoy, the farewell parties, promises to meet again, soon; the last cucumber sandwiches in Magdalen, the last punt . . .

Lydia yawned, and opened her eyes reluctantly. A stream of sunlight shone through the half-closed curtains on to the crumpled heap of last night's ball gown. Lydia slid her legs out from under the sheet and sat up, pushing the hair out of her eyes, yawning widely. She padded to the window, drew the curtains back, leant out to look over the lawns and the river and admire Magdalen Tower.

Lovely summer, she thought. No more essays, no more tutorials, no more exams, just blissful days in Greece, with Angus, no need to think about work until the autumn at the earliest.

She stretched, caught sight of the envelope left on the shelf. Funny old Angus, writing her notes when they had been together just a few hours before. Some arrangements for Greece that he wanted to make sure about, he was so fussy.

Lydia plonked herself down on her narrow college bed and opened the letter. Outside a bird burst into song, a hubbub of voices rose from a group rowing inexpertly and noisily along the Cherwell.

Lydia read the letter once, and sat, quite still, with it resting on her knee. Then she slowly reached out for her passport, ready on the chest of drawers.

Lydia Holbeck. Colouring fair, eyes grey, height 5'9".

A knock on the door. Lydia just sat, said nothing. The door opened and Mrs Ducat, Lydia's scout, clumped into the room.

'There you are, my duck, you should answer when I knock, though usually you do, I will admit, not leaving your manners at home like some of the young ladies I could mention. That Miss Byng, "I'll kill you, my duck," I told her, "if you do that again."'

The stream of words stopped for a few seconds as she looked at Lydia's still figure. 'You all right? Had a hard night, what you young ladies get up to, not like it was when I started here at the college, they were ladies then. I've come to tell you you're wanted on the phone, better get down there or they'll have rung off.'

Lydia was out of the room in a flash, leaving Mrs Ducat flattened against the doorpost, muttering balefully to herself about her young ladies.

'Hello? Angus?'

Silence. A clear, well-bred voice came down the line.

'I wish to speak to my granddaughter, Lydia Holbeck. Is there no-one there who can find her?'

Lydia slumped down into the hard chair that lived beside the phone box. She took a deep breath. 'I'm sorry, grandmama, I thought you were someone else. It's me, Lydia.'

'You sound exhausted. What have you been doing? And Angus, is this the young man your mother mentioned? A boyfriend?'

'No, not really, just a friend, grandmama. He was a friend, anyhow. It doesn't matter. Is everything all right? Nothing's happened to Mummy?'

'No, your mother is in France, as you know. That's why I'm ringing. I didn't like the thought of you being in the house in

London all by yourself while she's away, and then she told me you were going to Greece with a young man. Is this true?'

'No,' said Lydia wearily. 'It isn't true. I'm not going to Greece with anyone.' She didn't have the energy to defend her right to go to Greece with whoever she liked, that was a pointless skirmish at the moment.

'I'm very glad to hear it. Now, you must come up to me, at once, instead of going to London. The decorators are in, I gather, it would be most unsuitable for you to be there, and no doubt very inconvenient for them.'

'Eyot? Come up to Eyot?'

'Yes, what is the matter with you? You're very slow, Lydia. You are to come and stay with me. It's a long time since you were up here. I expect you are tired after exams and so on, you can relax and meet some nice young people, get back to normal after Oxford. Then we can talk about what you're going to do with yourself.'

'But, grandmama . . .'

'No buts. I'm looking forward to seeing you.'

Lydia looked at the earpiece, now buzzing at her. She put it back, resting her hand on it for a moment. She read the little cards pinned on to the soundproofing. 'Spire Cabs. Taxis Night and Day. Distance no object.'

She picked up the telephone again and dialled.

'Spire Cabs? Hello, I'd like a taxi to St Frideswyde's College please. In about half an hour. To go to the station. Yes, to the lodge, that's fine. Thank you, bye.'

An hour later, Mrs Ducat gave another perfunctory knock at Lydia's door and pushed it open. 'Well,' she said, her body quivering with indignation. 'Gone! And never so much as a goodbye, or a thank you.' Her beady little eyes flew about the room looking for a material thank-you if not a personal one. Ah, she knew Miss Holbeck wouldn't let her down. Not too bad, she thought, squinting into the envelope, not like that Miss Byng, who'd told her to use the tip to buy herself some sugar for her tongue. Sauce!

She glanced at the roped trunk in the centre of the room, she'd have to get Ted to come and fetch that down. She read