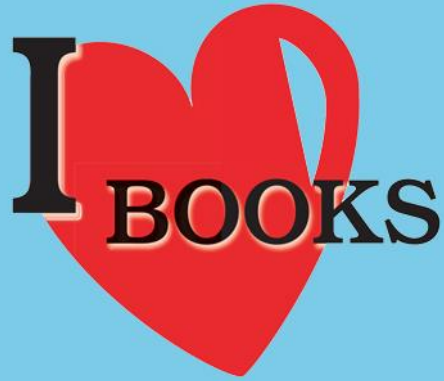




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Opening extract from
**William Wenton and the Luridium
Thief**

Written by
Bobbie Peers

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WILLIAM WENTON

AND THE
LURIDIUM
THIEF

BOBBIE PEERS

Translated from Norwegian by Tara Chace



WALKER
BOOKS

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Victoria Station, London

It was the middle of the morning rush hour. Busy, harried people scurried this way and that, everyone minding their own business. No one noticed an elderly bearded man running through the hall. He was clutching a brown-paper parcel and kept looking behind him, as if he was being chased.

He stumbled on a suitcase that someone was wheeling by. It took him a few steps to catch his balance, then he hurtled down the escalator to the underground.

Down on the platform, people were crushed together like lemmings on a cliff. The man pushed his way through and stopped at the far end of the platform. A cool breeze blew out of the tunnel. A train was coming.

None of the other travellers noticed the man jump down onto the tracks. The screech of an approaching train could be heard, and the wind whistling through the tunnel made his long beard flap.

The old man cast one last look up the platform before he turned and disappeared into the dark tunnel.

CHAPTER 1

Eight years later, at a secret address somewhere in Norway

William was so engrossed in what he was doing that he didn't hear his mother calling him. He sat hunched over a massive desk, and with a steady hand he tightened the final screw into a metal cylinder the size of an empty toilet roll. The cylinder, which divided into several sections, was engraved with intricate symbols and inscriptions.

William held it up to the light and studied it with satisfaction. He picked up a newspaper clipping, which showed a picture of a cylinder that looked just like the one he was holding in his hand. It said: *The Impossible Puzzle, the world's most difficult code, is coming to Norway. Can you crack it?*

Even though William had already read the article hundreds of times, he read it again. He studied the picture of the enigmatic metal cylinder. A group of the world's best cryptographers had spent more than three years creating it. And now it was on its introductory tour with the tagline "the world's most difficult

code". It was reputed to be impossible to crack. Some of the world's smartest people had already tried – and failed. And now it had finally come to Norway. Soon he would see it with his own eyes. He could hardly wait. Tomorrow the exhibition was moving on to Finland, so it was now or never.

"DINNER!" William's mother yelled from the kitchen.

William didn't respond. In his defence, sound did not travel particularly well in this house. The walls of every room were covered in bookshelves jam-packed with books that had been inherited from his grandfather, along with strict instructions never to get rid of them. The collection had been hauled over from England in seven large containers.

William had read them all. At least twice.

It had been eight years since they'd had to leave England. Eight years since they'd moved into this house. And eight years since Grandfather had disappeared. Now William and his parents lived incognito at a secret address, with new names, in a small town in Norway.

"WILLIAM OLSEN! DINNER!"

His mother didn't let up. William heard her now. She had said *Olsen*, William Olsen. He was never going to get used to that name. He longed for the day when he could tell everyone his actual name: William Wenton.

He'd given up asking about what really happened back in London eight years earlier. About why they were called Olsen

now. About why they lived here, in Norway of all places. And about what had happened to his grandfather. His parents had decided not to talk about it. As if all the secrets were somehow better than the truth.

He didn't know much about what had happened, except that it had something to do with a car accident. The same car accident that had left his father paralysed.

But there was more. Something so serious that his family had to disappear – and a thin little country that almost no one in the rest of the world could find on a map had been the perfect place to disappear to.

“DIIIIINNER!!” his mum yelled yet again.

“I just have to fix one little thing...” William muttered to himself. Then it was his father's turn to holler from the distance: “WILLIAM ... IT'S TIME FOR DINNER!”

William cautiously rotated the metal cylinder, feeling how the small pieces rested perfectly in his hands as if they understood him. Then the door to his room suddenly flew open, knocking over a tall stack of books. He jumped. One of the books hit the cylinder, which slipped out of his hands, landed on the floor with a *clunk!* and began to roll towards the door. William was just leaning down to pick it up when his father came over the threshold in his electric wheelchair, on a collision course with the cylinder. William watched in dismay as the full weight of one wheel drove over it with a metallic *crunch!* His father braked abruptly. The ruined electronics sparked and a

little cloud of smoke rose from the wreckage under the wheel. His father glared down at his wheelchair in irritation and wrinkled his nose.

“Is it playing up again? I just took it in to get it serviced!” he muttered to himself and then turned sternly towards William, who had moved his hand to cover the newspaper clipping on the desk. “It’s time for dinner ... NOW!” said his father, putting his chair in reverse, bumping into another stack of books and driving back out of the room.

William waited until the hum of his father’s stairlift had faded before he stood up. He took a breath. That had been close. But his father hadn’t seen anything, had he? William was quite sure that he’d managed to hide the newspaper clipping before his father noticed it. He walked over to the cylinder and picked it up. One side was dented. He shook it gently.

“Really?” He was annoyed with himself as much as anything. He glanced at the thick safety chain on the inside of his door. How had he forgotten to fasten it? He always locked his door when he was working on codes.

William turned and walked back over to the desk. He opened one of the drawers and put into it the newspaper clipping and what was left of the cylinder. He stood there for a while, staring thoughtfully at the other objects in the drawer: a mechanical hand he’d built himself, a 3-D metal puzzle, a Rubik’s cube and a shoebox that contained a soldering iron, some small screwdrivers and a pair of pliers.

He closed the drawer and locked it, hiding the key in a crack between two floorboards, then gave the room one last check to make sure he'd stowed everything away.

For some reason his father hated cryptography. In fact he'd forbidden any form of codebreaking activity. He wanted William to do the stuff normal children did: football, band practice, whatever. It was almost as if his father was afraid of codes, and afraid of William's interest in them. And it was getting worse. Now his dad was even cutting the crossword puzzles out of the newspaper and burning them in the fireplace. That's why William had started locking his bedroom door. So his father wouldn't discover all the stuff he had hidden in his room.

If his father only knew what it was like to be William. Some days all he could see around him were codes. For him, anything could be a code: a house, a car, stuff he saw on TV or read in a book. They were all puzzles, and his brain took over to solve them. It could even happen when he looked at a tree or the pattern in some wallpaper. Sometimes it was as if things dissolved right before his eyes so that he could see each individual component and where it fitted in. He'd had this gift for as long as he could remember, and it often got him into trouble. That's why he was happiest on his own. Preferably in his room, with the door locked, where he was in full control.

William looked again at the big desk; his grandfather's desk. The top was made from dark ebony, one of the hardest woods

in the world. In each corner there were carvings of demon-like faces, grimacing and sticking out their tongues.

William had been scared of the desk when he was little. But gradually, as he got older, he became curious. The whole desk top was covered with strange symbols. William imagined that they were secret messages from his grandfather, who was one of the best cryptologists in the world. Only, William hadn't managed to decipher the symbols yet. He hoped that someday he would understand them, that he would understand what his grandfather had written, and why.

"WE'RE EATING NOW!" His mother yelled again.

"Coming!" William replied. And in two easy steps he was out of the room.

CHAPTER 2

“Aren’t you hungry?” his mother asked.

“Not really,” William responded, pushing his plate away.

His father swallowed his mouthful. “You sit around too much,” he said. “When I was your age, we never just sat around. We played football, ran around outside, stole fruit off the neighbours’ trees. Look at you – you’re skin and bones.”

William tried to ignore his dad, but he knew he was right. He was skin and bones. But he was stronger than he looked. He always had been. No one in his class could do more push-ups than him. Even William’s PE teacher had trouble keeping up with him when he got going.

William glanced at the folded newspaper and pair of scissors sitting in his dad’s lap. Recently his father had started cutting even more out of the newspaper than the crossword – ever since advertisements had started appearing about the Impossible Puzzle exhibition that was coming to the History of Science Museum. His father seemed to be trying as hard as

he could to keep William away from it.

But what his father didn't know was that William's class was planning a trip to see the exhibition. His mum had told William he could go if he promised not to say anything to his father. And didn't touch any of the artefacts. It was as if his mum understood how much it meant to him, as if she recognized the tingle William felt every time he thought about the code no one had been able to crack, as if his mum knew he'd been dreaming about the exhibition ever since he'd first heard of the Impossible Puzzle. As if she knew, too, that it was now or never.

After his dad had left the table, William and his mother sat for a few more minutes. "Mr Turnbull is very concerned about the trip to the museum tomorrow," said his mum. "And so am I, actually. Living in hiding for so long has been hard for all of us, but we really can't draw attention to ourselves. You do know that, don't you?"

William didn't respond. He was thinking about his teacher, Mr Turnbull, who had hated him ever since William had corrected him in class one day.

"Look at me, William," his mum said sternly.

He turned and looked at her.

"Promise me you're going to behave yourself tomorrow!" she pleaded. "Can you promise me that? We've got to keep a low profile."

William knew he was going to have a hard time keeping his

hands off the Impossible Puzzle. But he also knew he couldn't do anything that would give them away.

“I promise,” he said and felt a twinge in his stomach.