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Opening extract from

Amethyst Child

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I wasted hours staring into the river. It was a superheated July. Brittle yellow grasses and vicious, black nettles thatched the river banks. The water was so low that in places you could cross on stepping stones. In other parts, the water was deep enough for swimming, where the bed plunged down into unplumbed stony basins. I never swam though – too scared of broken glass and weeds. A man in the local newspaper caught Weil's disease fishing in the shallows where the rats peed. He spent two weeks in a coma, had hallucinations that his body was riddled with worms and lost the sight in one eye. Not worth it, he said in the paper. A couple of hours' fun for a lifetime's suffering. So I didn't swim. Instead I sat on the footbridge near Mortimore's Wood, half a mile out of town, and gazed at the river where bright green weeds flowed like a nymph's hair, and the water varnished stones on the bed. I dreamed of immersion. I imagined what it would be like to lie underneath the clear, cold water, face-up like Ophelia in the painting, till the river drew out every last ounce of warmth from my overheated, sunburned body and I was dissolved and obliterated, entirely at one with the flowing water.

The summer holidays had just begun. I spent day after day on

the bridge, just sitting on my own. Staring, thinking, sluggish with heat, stifled by aimless desire. The endless wait.

Further upstream, someone jumped into the water. Two feet kicked noisily, and ripples slapped against the dry mud banks. A pile of clothes and a pair of sandals waited on the bank where the swimmer had undressed. Then she surfaced, and swam in a circle, a girl with dark red hair and a madly freckled face, about fourteen – my age – wearing just her pants and a crop top. She spat out a jet of muddy, possibly Weil's-contaminated water. I stared at her sideways, partly covering my eyes. The sun struck the back of my head like a hammer. Had she seen me? Surely yes. I was sitting on the edge of the bridge, my chest pressed against the railings, my legs dangling high above the water. She glanced my way, still swimming in circles, panting a little. Then she trod water and shaded her eyes to look up at me.

'Why don't you swim?' she called out. 'Aren't you hot?'

I shrugged. 'No thanks.'

'It's lovely. Not too cold when you get used to it.'

'It can be dangerous,' I said, wary of implying she was stupid to try it.

'So's travelling in a car,' she answered, wiping her wet face with the palm of her hand. 'I bet you do that.'

I didn't move.

'Come on.' She grinned. 'You must be boiling.'

I shook my head, holding the railings tight in case my body headed down to the river without my say-so. The girl tossed back her wet hair and swam upstream into a pool of shade where dusty trees arched over the water. Everything was quiet for a few minutes. Distantly I could hear cars on the road. Three draggled plastic bags hung from a thorn tree by the water, impaled by

earlier floods. Beneath my feet, way down, three small, brown trout nosed in the river.

Then she was back, hauling her way through the water with powerful strokes to the bank. She scrambled out of the river. Dry dirt clung to her wet feet and legs. Then she stood, breathing heavily, wringing water from her hair. She turned her face to me, white beneath the freckles, and grinned.

'You don't know what you're missing,' she called. 'You've got to make the most of it.' This with a swing of her arm in an arc that took in the blistering sun, the flawless sky, the summer all around us. She was tall and heavy-boned, but very slim. As she moved, you could see the skeleton just beneath her wet skin, the sculpted shoulder bones, the articulation of elbows and knees, the case of ribs on the flexible pole of her spine. She picked up her sandals and strode along the grassy path by the river and up to the bridge, and then she was beside me, close up, dripping water from her hair onto my back.

'I've seen you before,' she said, staring into my face. 'Around here.'

She smelled of the river. Water still beaded her neck and shoulders, soaking through her T-shirt from the wet crop top. I didn't know what to say.

'I'm Dowdie,' she said. I blinked and said my habitual 'What?' giving myself a moment to think.

'I'm Dowdie,' she repeated.

'Dowdy?' I echoed.

'You know – it's my name.'

'Dowdy's your name?' I repeated stupidly. I had to stop talking like an idiot, or the girl would go away. And oddly, I realised I didn't want her to go.

'Actually, the name on my birth certificate's Dorothy. But everyone's called me Dowdie for ever. Which is just as well,' she

mused, ''cos Dorothy's a crap name. I don't know what my mother was thinking.'

I didn't answer, not wanting to say the wrong thing. Did she want me to agree that Dorothy was a bad name? Or that her mother was stupid? But Dowdie was still staring at me, waiting for a response.

'I'm Amber,' I said. 'I haven't seen you before. Where do you go to school?'

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head, pushing back the wet hair from her forehead.

'Don't go to school. None of us do.' Dowdie stared into my face, searching for my reaction. 'You go to Harfield. I've seen you in your *uniform*.'

It was hard working out what she wanted from me. My modus operandi, of late, had involved calculating what people wanted to hear and then saying it. That was not so easy, this first meeting with Dowdie. But I was flattered. Unseen, she had identified me amongst the crowd. Twin feelings of pride and paranoia vied. Had she picked me out because I was different? If so, was this good different, or bad different?

'Yes. Summer holidays now though. Why don't you go to school?' I said.

She scrutinised me again. She had a way of looking, quite blatant, as if she wanted to see inside your head. Uncomfortable under such investigation, I looked away, to my solace, the river.

'Lots of reasons.' She sighed, as though she were stating the obvious. 'Schools breed conformity. They socialise children in a particular way – make them into cooperative team players with limited capacity to think for themselves.'

I didn't like school, but oddly her summary kindled an instinctive desire to defend it.

'It's not exactly like that.'

'No? How not?'

Unlike me, she didn't try and please, not at all. Dowdie said exactly what she thought.

'It doesn't always socialise you – make you a team player.' Her directness had upset me. I struggled to keep my voice even and stumbled over my words. 'Sometimes it has the opposite effect. It makes you realise how different you are to everyone else. And how alone.'

Dowdie twisted her head, to peer into my face. Her eyes were only centimetres from mine. I could see the delicate pores on the end of her rather beaky nose.

'I know that,' she said, offhand, stating the obvious again. 'You're not like the others. That's why I noticed you. I've seen you walking along the road with the rest of the herd and I've seen you walking apart from them, and the shadow over your face like you were walking into the gates of hell. I know that, Amber. I know lots and lots of things.'

She stretched up her strong, boyish arms and grabbed the sun-heated hand rail on the bridge, pulling herself up to her feet.

'Come on. Let's go. Where do you live? Are your parents home?' We'd only met minutes before but she spoke as though we were friends already.

I jumped up, ready to follow. 'They're at work. We can go there if you like. But it's not that great.' Already my mind was galloping ahead. We lived in a small, very new house on the Napier South estate. There was nothing remarkable about it, and Dowdie herself seemed so remarkable I didn't want her to see it. But Dowdie was not to be put off and I didn't have the strength of mind – or the will – to refuse her.

We talked all the way. Or rather, I asked her questions and

Dowdie answered at length. She told me she lived in the Community. This threw me at first. Where we used to live, in the house opposite, were four men with learning difficulties. They lived, as we were told, in the community. They had support workers who made sure they were coping. One of those men, with a big black beard and a vast belly, used to ask me very direct questions and in a flash I wondered if Dowdie, too—

'The Community,' she snapped, as though she'd read my thoughts. 'It's a spiritual community. Twenty of us. There's a terrace of three cottages made into one and a big, shared garden where we grow lots of vegetables and fruit. We're not part of all this.' Another sweep of her arm, indicating the busy road and approaching town with its shops, factories, pizza outlets, offices, car parks, retail barns. I think I loved her from that moment, because I knew what she meant without her saying it, and her face was animated and she spoke with a freedom and passion I had never seen in anyone before.

'What's it like – the Community,' I ventured, burning with curiosity. We crossed the busy road and headed along the pavement by the youth centre, and under the railway arches. Outside the cinema half a dozen people were queuing.

'I've lived there with my mum for the last ten years – since I was a little girl,' she said. 'Everything's held in common. We live simply, you see. No television, no computers, no phones.'

'So have people got jobs, or what?'

'Some have ordinary jobs. And there's a workshop at the Community where a couple of the men run a joinery business. And Green Shoots – the healthfood shop at the top of the High Street? The Community owns that. My mum works there.'

I knew Green Shoots. My own mum went there sometimes. It sold the usual selection of dried beans and organic muesli, health

supplements, Bach flower remedies and suchlike. A noticeboard near the door carried advertisements for Reiki healing and meditation classes. Perhaps I had seen Dowdie's mum, then, working at the till.

'So, is it a Christian community?' I spoke tentatively, wary it might well be the wrong thing to say. So it proved.

'No! Christianity is another system of brainwashing and patriarchal control!' This with a toss of her head and a glint in her eyes.

'Jesus was a remarkable man,' she said. 'But the Christian church has precious little to do with his suggestion that we should live simply and love one another. That is what we try and do in the Community. To live truly and deeply as human beings, to be conscious of our relationship with one another and the universe.'

Dowdie, in her imaginary pulpit. None of the girls at school spoke like this. They were all wrapped up in closer concerns – trips to New Look, mobile phones, music magazines, Bebo accounts.

'It sounds . . . really cool,' I said, struggling for an appropriate response.

'Cool!' Dowdie snorted with laughter. 'Yes,' she conceded. 'Yes, it is cool. When I look at all this, I appreciate just how cool it is. If I had to live here – to be part of it – that would kill me.' The last sentiment she expressed in a clear, low voice, and with complete seriousness.

It felt like another criticism. After all, however unhappily, I lived 'here' and it hadn't killed me. Was I less sensitive than she was, then, that I survived it? Was Dowdie made of a more fragile and precious material?

We were drawing near the Napier South estate, a toy town of identikit houses, cul-de-sacs, open spaces where young, low maintenance saplings were tied by rubber bands to wooden stakes.

I had never much liked it, preferring our old Victorian terrace, but my parents were keen to take another step up the property ladder. True enough, the new house was warmer, lighter and less plagued by erratic electrics and damp. I no longer had to share a bedroom with my six-year-old brother either.

'This is it.' Number fourteen, Field View. I unlocked the door. Both parents were at work. My brother was safely spending the day at a holiday playscheme at the leisure centre. I stepped inside, sensing Dowdie's quick scrutiny of the magnolia and peach walls and the prints from Ikea. Of course I love my parents. They are generous, kind and completely committed to my brother and me. My dad works for a computer installation company, and my mum has a part-time job as deputy manager of a jewellery shop. Once a year we go on two weeks' holiday to Majorca where we take it in turns to decide what to do each day. I have nothing to complain about, parentwise. They're not cool, though. Not like Dowdie's mum, living in her Community, or one girl in my tutor group whose parents take her to festivals all summer long, even if she misses school. You know those endless makeover/holiday swap/trading places programmes on the television all the time? They always pick two diverse families, just to show a contrast and to get the sparks flying. I was watching one, where a smart woman from a big house on a development like Napier South lived for a fortnight with a huge, chaotic family on a social housing estate somewhere in the North East. And I realised that while the middle-class family stuck to the rules and did all the right things – ate their five portions of fruit and veg, spent quality time with their kids, fussed about their education – what they forgot to do was enjoy themselves. I think my parents are like that. They're so busy doing their jobs and cleaning the car and maintaining the house they've forgotten to have any fun. Even

our family outings are in earnest – cycling together to get our quota of exercise.

'We'll go to my room,' I said, before Dowdie could examine the decor more closely. I galloped up the stairs, Dowdie close behind me. 'This is it,' I said. 'This is my place.'

When we moved to Field View (there is no field view, of course) a year ago, my kindly parents agreed I could decorate my room as I wished, recognising my need for self-expression and my disappointment in moving from the old house, with its aged apple tree and murky stained-glass fanlight. So I painted it black.

In pride of place on the inky walls was a poster of an antique landscape, towering cliffs where a city castle perched beneath a moon curved like a scimitar. Swags of torn lace hung in artfully arranged scallops beneath the ceiling. In a large alcove beside the built-in wardrobe, my dad had installed numerous shelves now chock-a-block with my book collection, which spilled over into boxes on the floor. On another shelf, above my bed, were three ornate jewelled perfume bottles my uncle had bought for me in Prague, a pair of black iron candlesticks looped with crystal necklaces and my CDs of Placebo, Bach, My Chemical Romance and Fall Out Boy. There were other pictures too, stills of Edward Scissorhands and old prints of castles, sinister fairy maidens and knights on horses, sealed in clip-frames.

I loved my room. In the midst of Dowdie's 'all this' it was my sanctuary. It was my place – just as I wanted it. Here I wove my own protective spells with books and music and poems, my web of dreams.

But what would Dowdie think? I felt a plunging panic for a moment, bringing her here. Perhaps it wasn't magical, but crass and predictable? The protective spell faltered. Sad teen's naff black room in unsuitable suburban house.

'It's very goth,' she said. Then, glancing at me: 'But that's not a surprise.'

What did she see? A shortish girl with mouse-brown hair wearing a shapeless black T-shirt and jeans. Nothing remarkable. Neither pretty nor ugly, neither fat nor thin. Not even very goth, truth be told – not on the outside at least. Merely camouflaged; receding into the background, not wanting to be noticed. If Dowdie thought my bedroom was tacky, she was sensitive enough not to say so. Perhaps she sensed the overlay of dream and desire I had painted along with the matt emulsion.

She moved across to the bookshelf. 'You read a lot,' she observed. Yes, I did read a lot. It was a path to other worlds, an escape.

'I want to be a writer.' This blurted out, eager to impress. 'I've written lots of stories. I'm halfway through a novel.'

Dowdie nodded, unsurprised, as though this revelation was merely a confirmation of what she already knew.

'Perhaps I could read it one day.'

'If you like. Yes, of course.'

She picked up a book or two, and then browsed through my CDs.

'I don't listen to much music,' she said. 'But I like it. I don't know these bands – perhaps you can educate me.'

She sat down on my bed, a CD in her hand. 'We're going to be great friends, Amber,' she said. 'I know it.'

I sat down beside her. 'How do you know it?'

'I told you, I know things. This will be an astonishing summer.'

'How do you know things?' She was so certain, and I sounded like a three year old. She took a deep breath, as though she might, after all, be nervous. Then she said:

'Have you heard of Amethyst children?'

'No.'

'James – James Renault – he's the elder at the Community.'

'The leader? He's in charge?'

'Not leader exactly – but kind of. Years ago, a spirit spoke through him and predicted that all over the world special children would be born – children with gifts and abilities not seen before, who would lead humankind into the future. They would be the next evolutionary step.' Her freckled face was perfectly serious, her voice was grave.

'These are the Amethyst children?' I said.

Dowdie nodded.

'They have certain features in common. They find it hard to fit in. They can't conform and struggle in ordinary schools, often because they are very intelligent and the lessons are too – obvious. So they get into trouble. They have an unusual perspective on things – take a contrary view. Some are healers, others are seers.'

'And you think you are one of them?' I tried to keep my voice level, wanting to express neither scepticism nor credulity.

'I don't *think* I am – I know so,' she said, staring at me, daring me to contradict or laugh. I did neither.

'How do you know?'

She laughed then – at stupid Amber. 'How do I know? How do we know anything? I know it because it's the truth.'

'So what does it mean? What are your special gifts?'

She put down the CD and stared at her hands. 'It's not something I can explain, just like that,' she said.

For a moment, I couldn't make out who she was – what she was doing. She was two things at once – older than her age, an adult in disguise. Or else a kid playing pretend, trying to lure me into her imaginary game. The two images diverged and drew together again.

She took another quick breath, as though she had made a decision.

'I think you're an Amethyst child too,' she said. Perhaps she thought I would laugh at her because her face seemed cold and hard for a moment, some kind of fierce protective shield going up.

I blinked. 'What?'

'That's why I wanted to talk to you. I felt it – when I saw you walking to school. And then, at the river, when you were staring into the water all the time.'

'You were spying on me?'

Dowdie brushed away the question. 'What d'you think?' she said.

My thoughts dissolved in a welter of contradictory emotions. Anxiety and doubt, and a gleaming golden thread of pride. Was she flattering me – or trying to trick me into something?

'I don't know,' I said in a hurry. 'I'm not special. I don't have any gifts. How can I be one of these children? I don't know anything about it.'

Dowdie shrugged, in control again. 'That's why I've come,' she said. 'To help you. We were meant to meet. I told James about you too, and he said I should talk to you – be a friend. And if you like, I'll take you to the Community. You can meet him yourself.'

About a year ago, on a school History trip to Glastonbury, we climbed the Tor. It was a brisk, chilly morning in March. The sky was a wide, cold blue and beneath us the Somerset levels spread into the distance. The Tor was steep, the anomalous peak woven with paths. Inside the tower at the top, two hippy types were sitting casually on the ground. A couple of the boys made insulting comments about dope smoking, but the young man and woman ignored them. They were slim and beautiful, with long, hennaed hair in wild dreadlocks and clear, pale skin. Each wore

half a dozen necklaces, rings on their fingers, long boots, and layers of colourful clothing. The sight of them filled me with longing. It's hard to describe, the root of this curious pain. They looked like they had stepped from the pages of one of my books, and had an air of complete freedom and self-possession. They seemed like royalty.

Disinherited royalty perhaps, living in exile, but they were princes nevertheless. I ached to be them.

And now, sitting beside Dowdie in my little black room, the same feeling came over me. It was as though I'd glimpsed a foreign kingdom through a magic casement. The lost land I longed for.



The police station – an anonymous glass and steel barn on a trading estate at the edge of the town. It isn't like I'd imagined – no red-brick building, no blue lamp outside, no constable standing guard. It could have been a DIY store, or an office-block filled with insurance salesmen. Parked cars fill the slip road, spilling out from the other warehouses and business units on the trading estate. But I can't see anyone. The pavements are empty.

I stare out of the window as Mum hits the indicator and the car turns on the mini roundabout. Plastic bottles and crisp packets litter the dead grass on the verges. I have a fleeting mental image of office workers mindlessly eating their lunch as they walk, and casting their refuse to the ground.

Mum glances at me as she turns the car into a bay marked for visitors. Half a dozen seagulls are tossed on the wind above the trading estate, but inside the car the gently heated air smells of synthetic lavender from the air freshener dangling beneath the mirror. Air freshener. As I breathe its chemical soup the irony nudges. Even now, you see, under such circumstances, I'm distracted. So many random thoughts. The mind never stops chewing.

It's hard to explain how I feel. As though a large, iron ball has

lodged itself tight inside my ribcage and coldly presses against heart and lungs and belly. It is a steadfast, barren pain I cannot avoid however much I turn and twist.

Mum turns off the engine and gives a quick, anxious sigh. She unclips her seat belt and looks at me.

'Are you OK?' she says.

'Yes.' She's had to take an afternoon off work to bring me here. Had to make half a dozen hurried phone calls to switch shifts, to find cover. She's smartly dressed, in the little cream skirt and jacket combination she bought from Marks and Spencer, with a silky, rose-coloured blouse. Her face is very pale. Perhaps she too has been crying.

'Are you sure you're OK?' She puts her hand on my thigh, to reassure. She wants me to throw my arms around her as though I am a little girl again and she can solve my troubles with a cuddle. I read this in her face, her own pain at her inability to comfort me. But I haven't room for anybody else's pain.

'Yes,' I repeat. 'I'm OK.'

She gives another of her anxious sighs, then opens the car door and clicks across the road in her little stilettos to the police-station doors. It takes an effort to lift myself from the car seat. My body feels disjointed, as though my limbs are full of stones. I step into the reception area. A middle-aged woman, bursting out of a white blouse, stands behind a glass screen while on our side a very thin man with long, greasy hair assails her with complaints and excuses that seem to stem from a problem with his vehicle documents. The woman's face is blank. Probably she has heard it all before. He goes on and on, a convoluted story I lose track of straight away, as though the sheer quantity of words will eventually get him what he wants. Perhaps he thinks she will relent simply to shut him up.

Mum is fidgety and impatient, glancing at her watch. She wanders around the reception area, looking at posters and reading notices.

From time to time she smoothes the front of her jacket. I sit on one of three uncomfortable plastic chairs by the wall. A leaflet on the wall opposite admonishes me not to drink and drive. Another, with a picture of smiling people, advertises a support service for the victims of crime. The man drones on, and the minutes pass. For a while my mind drifts.

'Amber. Amber – it's us now.' Long-haired man has gone. Mum is standing by the glass screen now. She clears her throat.

'We've come to see Detective Inspector Ripley.'

The reception woman simply stares for a second or two.

'D'you have an appointment?' she says.

'Yes.' Mum is flustered now, tense and irritated. 'We were supposed to see him five minutes ago – but that man . . . well, we were here on time. We've been waiting fifteen minutes.'

'I'll ring him,' the woman says. She picks up the phone, but keeps her eyes firmly fixed on my mother, as though suspecting she will throw something at the screen. After a few seconds she replaces the receiver.

'He's not at his desk,' she says. 'Are you sure you have an appointment? He's been in meetings all day.'

She seems to find my mother's agitation deeply satisfying and for the first time I begin to sympathise with the long-haired man.

'Yes!' Mum says. 'Yes! Look, he phoned me up this morning, and I had to make all sorts of special arrangements for work. It's very important.'

For the first time, reception woman notices me.

'What's your name?' she says to my mum.

'Jane Renalden. Jane and Amber Renalden.'

Reception woman sighs deeply, picks up the phone again and announces on some kind of loudspeaker system that Detective Inspector Ripley has visitors in reception.

'Sit down,' she says. 'I expect he'll be with you in a few minutes.'

Mum does as she's told and takes the chair beside mine. We sit in silence. Various people come and go through a double door. None of them so much as register our presence. Finally, another ten minutes later, the door opens and a man in a very smart suit smiles at us.

'Mrs Renalden – Amber. I am so sorry to keep you waiting.' He tells us to sign in. Reception woman gives us plastic visitors' badges to wear, with our names scribbled on them.

The detective inspector is very courteous and helpful and tells us to call him Neil. He uses a security card to open the double doors again and ushers us inside. We follow him across a kind of indoor courtyard space, up a flight of stairs, along corridors and finally into a small office overlooking the car park. He pulls out chairs for us, comfortable padded office chairs with arms.

'Sit down, please. Can I get you a tea or coffee? What about you, Amber? Coffee? A Coke maybe?'

He sticks his head out of the door and calls to some minion to bring us refreshments. Then he plops down in his chair and treats us to a generous smile.

'Again, I'm sorry to keep you waiting,' he says. 'I've been in a meeting – relating to this . . . this incident.'

I take the time to look at him carefully, Detective Inspector Neil Ripley. He's in his early thirties, I would guess. Tall, strong, with a square, masculine face and bright blue eyes. His hair is dark blond, but his clean-shaved jaw is dark – as though rampant stubble is waiting to burst from his skin. I'd been expecting a man in a uniform but Detective Inspector Call-Me-Neil wears an expensive-looking tawny suit. When he unbuttons the jacket, it reveals a shimmering silk lining, a rich, exotic blue. His red tie is also silk and his cuffs fastened with gold links. Clearly he lavishes plenty of time, thought and money on his appearance.

I think he notices my scrutiny because he looks at me and asks me how I am.

'OK,' I say.

'I'm going to ask one of my staff to sit in on our chat, to take notes. Is that all right with you?'

'Sure,' I say. He also glances at Mum and she nods. While we're waiting for our drinks and the note-taking assistant, the detective inspector makes small talk with Mum. His manner is intimate and attentive. I can see my mother rather helplessly responding to him, to his good looks and charm. Is he trained to do this, I wonder, or does it come naturally?

A spindly young man with a spotty chin brings in a tray with our drinks and an older man follows on his heels with a tape recorder in one hand and a notebook in the other. He sets up the tape recorder and announces the date, time, and who is present in the room. Mum starts to panic. This has all become like a police drama on the telly – as though I'm a suspect in a cell.

'Is all this necessary?' she blunders. 'I mean, Amber hasn't done anything wrong. I thought you just wanted to talk with her? To get some background.' She stands up from her chair, as though she wants to make a break for freedom, but Call-Me-Neil reaches out to reassure her. He gently touches her arm.

'Please – sit down. There's nothing to worry about, Mrs Renalden. Please. This is just for our records.'

Mum is soothed, just. She flutters a little, then settles down again. The older man recedes to a corner of the room and the detective inspector takes a seat opposite my mother and me, giving us another flash of the blue silk lining. Then he clasps his hands together and smiles.

'Right. Where shall we start? First of all, Amber – how old are you?'

'Fifteen.'

'She had her birthday just last week,' Mum breaks in. The policeman nods at her politely but his attention is now fixed firmly on me.

'Fifteen,' he repeats. 'OK Amber, will you tell me when you first met James Renault?'

'At the end of July. The beginning of the summer holidays – just after I first met Dowdie.'

'Dowdie. That's Dorothy Johnson, right?'

'Yes. Dowdie lived with the Community. I met her first.'

'And she took you over there – to the Community?'

'Yes.'

'Can you remember the exact date of your first visit?'

'Not off the top of my head. But I could probably work it out, if I had my diary.'

'And did you meet James Renault that first time you went there?'

'Yes.'

Call-Me-Neil is quiet for a moment, as though turning things over in his mind. He unclasps and clasps his hands. He leans forward, propping his elbows on his thighs.

'What did you make of him?' he says. 'What were your first impressions, Amber? What kind of man was he?'

I am uncomfortably aware that everyone is waiting for me to speak – my mother, the detective inspector, the old man with his notebook, even the tape recorder. I don't like to be the centre of attention. I feel the blood heat my face and I twitch on the chair.

'It's hard to say.'

'Well try. You must have thought something about him, Amber. Anything.'

I sense my mother beside me, willing me to speak. What had I thought about him, that first time at the Community?

'He seemed OK.' I shrug. 'A nice bloke, you know? Very friendly. Very interested in everyone.'

He seizes on this.

'Friendly, yes? So when did you first talk to him, Amber? Can you remember what he said to you?' I notice how often the detective inspector uses my name. Perhaps this is a technique to gain my trust.

'I went over and stayed the night, Neil,' I say. 'In the evening, the Community had this kind of gathering thing. They all ate together and James gave a talk. Afterwards, when everyone was just hanging out and talking, he came over and spoke to me.'

'He gave a talk? Can you remember what it was about?'

I give a cold smile. The metal sphere trapped in my ribcage expands and contracts painfully.

'The Amethyst children and evolution,' I say. 'Connection. Revelation. Apocalypse.'

The charged words hang in the air, as though I have written them there. But the police officer brushes them away with a wave of his hand.

'Can you be more specific Amber? What exactly did he say? Do you know what he meant by that?'

Inside me, the question stirs like a forest of leaves. I close my eyes. What had James Renault intended, truly? What had he believed?