SECRET BREAKERS

THE POWER OF THREE

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Illustrations by Meggie Dennis

Hodder Children's Books

A division of Hachette Children's Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2012
by Hodder Children's Books

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A Catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 340 99961 5

Typeset in AGaramond Book by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The paper and board used in this paperback by Hodder Children's Books are natural recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder Children's Books
a division of Hachette Children's Books
338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH
An Hachette UK company
www.hachette.co.uk

Then Arthur looked at the sword, and liked it very much.

'Which do you like better,' said Merlin, 'the sword or the scabbard?'

'I like the sword better,' said Arthur.

'You are most unwise,' said Merlin, 'for the scabbard is worth ten of the sword.'

Adapted from *Le Morte D'Arthur* by
Sir Thomas Malory,
Book 1 Chapter 25

1

Following the Call of the Code

Brodie Bray held the writing towards the light.

It was then she saw them.

Holes.

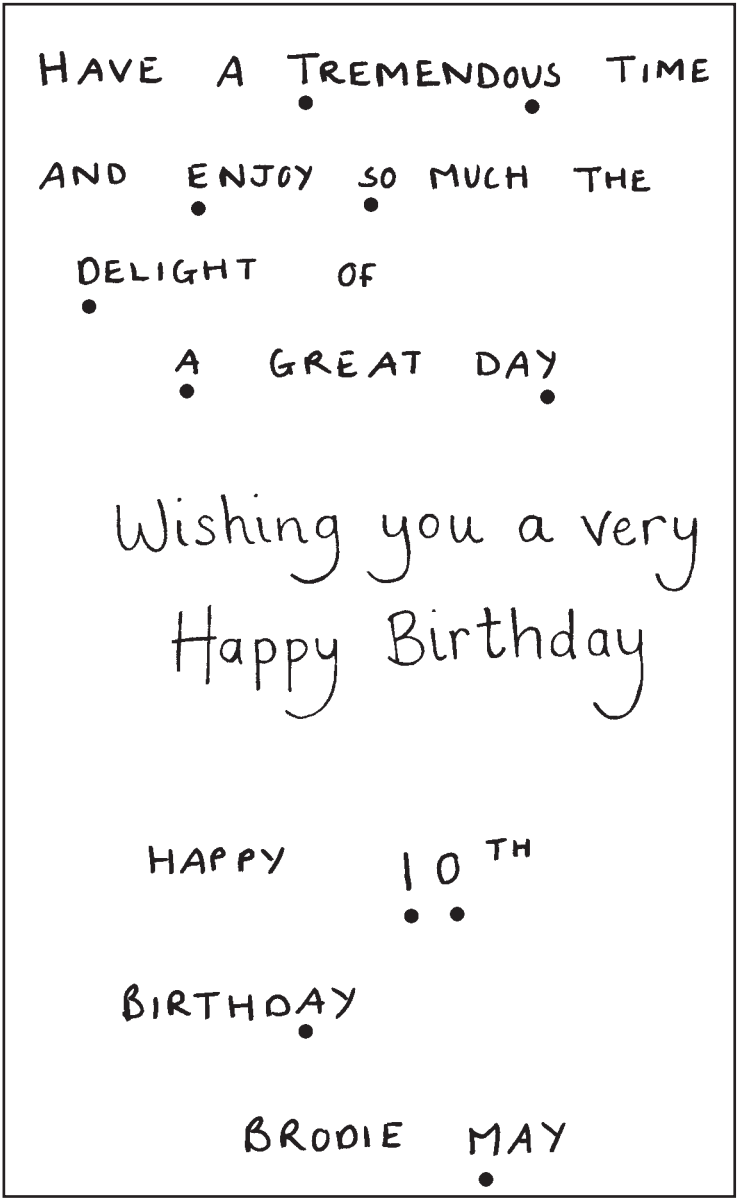
Amazing really, she hadn't seen them before. It was only the angle of the sun, streaming through the window, which made them visible now. Tiny pinpricks pushed through the surface of the birthday card.

Eleven.

The holes weren't random. They'd been precisely placed.

She grabbed a piece of paper and pen and wrote out each letter marked with a pinprick. Then she read the message aloud.

Tuesday 10am


HAVE A TREMENDOUS TIME
AND ENJOY SO MUCH THE
DELIGHT OF
A GREAT DAY
Wishing you a very
Happy Birthday
HAPPY 10TH
BIRTHDAY
BRODIE MAY

Now she was scared.

Someone was trying to send her a message. And she had no idea who.

Everything about today's delivery from the postman was confusing. An unsigned card when it was nowhere near her birthday; her name written incorrectly inside; even her age was wrong. And the bright orange socks she now wore, which had come with the card, were far too big.

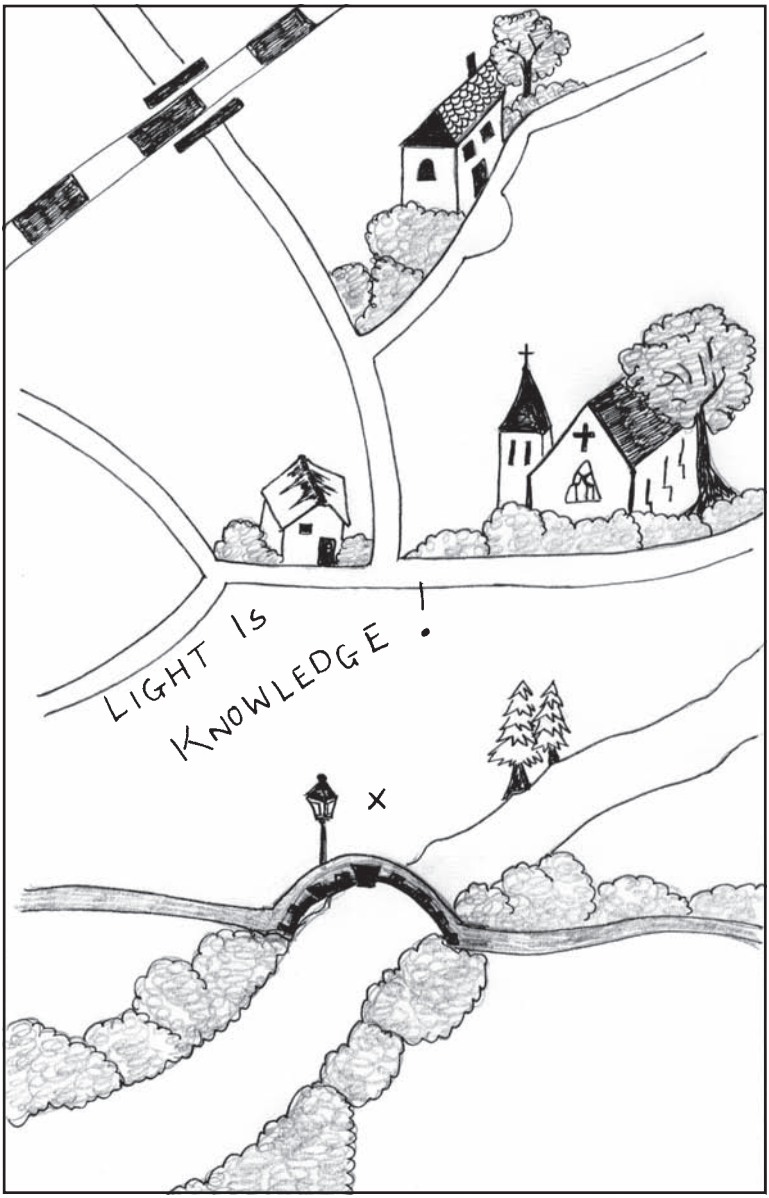
She put the card down on the floor and her hand knocked against the glass of water by the bed. She jumped up too late to stop it falling. Water splashed on her feet.

It was only when she knelt to sponge up the mess, she saw the orange stains across the back of the card. Ink. From the socks.

And there, marked clearly now, was a map.

And three words.

Light is knowledge


LIGHT IS
KNOWLEDGE !

*

Mr Smithies was a member of a secret organisation. It was such a secret organisation even Mr Smithies' wife didn't know anything about it. As far as Mrs Smithies was concerned, her husband worked at the tax office. She packed his sandwiches every day and watched him leave for work every morning, waving him off from the kitchen window wearing her bright yellow Marigold gloves. Every evening she set Mr Smithies' dinner on the table at six o'clock sharp and when they'd eaten they went into the lounge and watched Mrs Smithies' favourite television programmes. They never talked about his work. Which was just as well as Mr Smithies wasn't allowed to.

The organisation Mr Smithies worked for had an unusual name: the 'Black Chamber'. Black Chambers had existed in one form or another for centuries. They'd always been secret organisations created to find out secrets. The very best brains in the country (Mr Smithies was very proud of this part) were specially selected and trained by the British Black Chamber simply to do this job. The problem was there really wasn't much that was 'simple' about it.

Clearly, the best way to keep a secret is not to tell anybody.

But sometimes information has to be shared. Just

not with everyone. That's when codes are used. Writing messages in code means only certain people can understand what's said. This is an excellent system for controlling who knows what. Those who understand the code have power.

Black Chambers make codes. And break codes. Codes that contain secrets. Sometimes the secrets are exciting; sometimes they are dangerous; and sometimes they change the course of history. So, however hard the codes are to crack, it's important the workers in the Black Chamber never give up. Mr Smithies believed this. He really did. And Mr Smithies loved his job. At least, he *had* loved it. Recently things hadn't been going so well. Things were changing and Mr Smithies was not a man who dealt well with change.

However, today Mr Smithies had other things on his mind. He had a meeting to attend and he was feeling very awkward about the whole thing.

Mr Smithies had agreed to meet Robbie Friedman in a small café at the edge of Russell Square. He spent a few moments checking he hadn't been followed, then opened the café door. Friedman was already there; a tall man, with fair skin, and hair wild around his face like a thick blond halo, a golden necklace glinting at the base of his throat.

‘Good of you to agree to see me again, Smithies,’ he said.

Smithies felt this was a bit of an understatement. If anyone from the Black Chamber knew he was meeting Friedman there’d be trouble. Friedman and trouble seemed to go together, like eggs and bacon or bangers and mash. Smithies ordered the full English breakfast, pulled out a chair and sat down.

Friedman hadn’t always been trouble. There was a time when he had been one of the most important code-crackers in the country. That was all before the rather unfortunate mistake he’d made. Now Friedman was in exile and Smithies was taking a huge risk in meeting him. But Smithies wasn’t afraid of risk.

‘It’s done,’ Smithies said. ‘Operation Veritas has been reactivated. I’ve sent out the invitations.’

Excitement flashed in Friedman’s eyes. ‘You’re sure we can do this?’

‘No. But you and I both know we’ve got to try. It’s what we always agreed. If we ever discovered any new information about the manuscript, then we’d relaunch the Study Group section of the Black Chamber.’

‘So who’ve you asked? The best minds in the country? New graduates just out of university? How many from Oxford and Cambridge?’

Smithies’ hand froze in midair. A globule of egg

slipped from his fork and slopped into a puddle of baked beans. 'None,' he said.

Friedman's lip twitched.

'Look, it's complicated, Robbie,' Smithies whispered. 'Modern code-cracking's all about computers and targets and internet security. No one's interested in a five-hundred-year-old manuscript nobody can read. People don't remember the work of the Study Groups any more. Veritas disbanded forty years ago.'

He lifted the chipped spotty mug to his lips. When he put the mug down, he wore a milky white moustache.

'And anyway, MS 408's a banned document. It's got a "D notice" on it. No one can go anywhere near it legally.'

'So who've you asked, then?'

The end of the milky moustache dripped a little. 'Children,' he said.

Friedman took a moment before he answered. 'Are you totally insane, Smithies?'

'Possibly. But that's hardly the point. And with all due respect I don't think you're exactly in a position to be making comments like that.'

Friedman shuffled in his chair.

'The fact is, Robbie, I had a spark of inspiration. Like a fire. We were just children ourselves when we were first involved and so to me it made perfect sense.'

Friedman now wore a face which made it look like he'd swallowed some particularly vile-tasting medicine.

'Using children's the answer. I know it. Children have nothing to lose. They don't know what's OK to see and what isn't. They haven't got the weight of expectation on their shoulders.'

Friedman still looked a little green.

'Most importantly, children haven't been put off code-cracking and replaced by computers in their work. There's still a chance they'll have a love of the code. Don't you remember how it used to be? When we were young and unafraid? When there was the thrill of the chase?'

Friedman's eyes lightened a little but when he spoke his voice shook. 'Children, Smithies. Is that safe? You know . . . after everything?'

It was Smithies' turn to look uncomfortable. 'There's no other way.'

'But the risks involved. We'd be putting them in danger.'

Smithies ran his finger along the rim of the mug. 'It's children. Or it's over.'

Friedman took a while before he looked up. 'Go on,' he said.

'I've chosen carefully. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren of code-breakers who worked in the

war. And obviously descendants of the 1960s Study Group Veritas. They'll be less likely to ask awkward questions. They've secrecy running through their veins! And the children are most likely to be naturally good at accepting a challenge.' He paused. 'We'll just have to be careful.'

Friedman jabbed at the yolk of his egg with his fork. 'How will it work?'

'Ahh, now this is the part I'm particularly proud of.' Smithies beamed. 'We're going to run the whole thing like a home-school learning project. There's some loopholes in the law I'm making use of. We'll set up a sort of Code and Cipher School using some of the old-style code-crackers as teachers.'

'Teachers?'

'Yep. I've put the word out, secretly of course. Tried to draw in some retired code-breakers who can pass on what they know. Old-style stuff. That doesn't rely on computers. You know the sort of thing, Robbie. Teaching an eye for subtlety, a nose for connections, an ear for a link.' He leant forward in his chair. 'I've got interviews set up for this afternoon. We should end up with an excellent team of children and a top-class team of code teachers.' He pushed his empty plate across the table. 'This time we're going to be lucky, Robbie. I know it. The time to make sense of MS 408 has finally come.'

* * *

Tandi Tandari, Mr Smithies' secretary, winced a little and lowered her head. A flurry of tight black curls tumbled over her shoulder. 'I'm sorry, sir. He was the only one to turn up.'

Smithies peered through the frosted screen door at a man wearing a pair of pyjama trousers tied up with a garish yellow necktie.

'And you didn't feel the need to get rid of him?' Smithies hissed.

Tandi clutched a pile of Manila folders tightly to her and shook her head defiantly. 'No, sir. I didn't feel it polite to "get rid of him". He was, after all, the only one to come.'

'But where are the others I invited?'

'Dead, sir.' She paused. 'Or in prison. And these two here,' she flicked to the uppermost files, 'are in institutions apparently. This one hasn't spoken a word for nearly ten years.'

Smithies grimaced. 'Oh well, Oscar "Sicknote" Ingham will certainly make up for that then.'

'Sir?'

'Never mind.' Smithies pushed open the door and made his way into the board room. 'Oscar,' he said with a fair degree of effort. 'How've you been?'

'Oh, you know, Jon. Never without pain.'

Smithies counted to ten silently in his head.

All things considered the interview went quite badly. Oscar Ingham was enjoying his retirement, hated the thought of working with children and was appalled at the idea of being on the staff of a Code and Cipher School.

'So why *exactly* did you answer the call?' said Smithies, biting back the urge to also ask why a fully grown man had decided to arrive at a meeting he so obviously didn't want to be at, and hadn't even bothered to change out of his pyjamas.

Ingham reached into his pocket and took out a small container of tablets, emptied two into his hand and swallowed them before speaking. 'MS 408,' he said with an urgency that made Smithies' heart quicken. 'You said there's a new lead.'

Smithies reached into his briefcase and very carefully, as if afraid it may turn to dust in his hand, he drew out a small yellowed envelope. Across the back of the envelope was a seal pressed into thick red wax. It showed a bird in flight. A phoenix with wings spread wide. The mark of the Firebird. The seal was broken. The envelope open. And with hands that shook a little, Smithies drew out a folded sheet of paper and laid it on the table.