

Chance of a Lifetime. Margaret I gulden and Julia Allen

Level 4 (1200 word level)

Introduction

The astrologer smiled. 'Now, let's see what's going to happen in the next few months. Hmm. You're going to travel and meet new people.' 'Yes! I've got a job as a tour guide.' 'But Pluto is here. Pluto means secrets. Dark secrets. Deep secrets.' 'Secrets? My secrets?' 'I don't know. But be careful. Perhaps secret things will happen.' 'A secret love?' 'I don't know. It's too difficult to say. . .'

When Helen travels through Europe, on her first job after university, she starts to discover important things. What does she learn? Something about herself? Or about the other people on the trip? What secrets are they hiding? And "What will Helen's future be?

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Margaret and Julia began writing together in 1986.

Some other stories by them are: African Adventure (1988), The Sacrifice (1989), who Wants to be a Star (1989), Susan and The Flying Saucer (1990), The Bogey Bees (1998) and Save Our Wood (1999).

This story was written specially for Penguin Readers.

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<Chapter 1>

The Phone Call

Helen couldn't sleep. She opened her eyes and looked at her watch. It was three o'clock. She switched on the small light above her bed and read the letter again.

Dear Ms Davies, Thank you for coming to see us. As we told you, we need a tour guide for a trip from London to Istanbul. We would like to offer you this job. . .

Helen stopped reading. 'What should I do? I need to talk to Tom about it,' she thought.

She looked at Tom's photograph on the table next to her. It showed a tall, dark-haired young man with a beard. The photograph was taken just after their final examinations at Swansea University.

'I remember that day,' she thought. 'We drove to a beach and went for a long walk. It was a perfect day - and only a month ago.'

'Oh, Tom. What are we going to do? You never wanted to talk about us! And now you're in Scotland and I'm in Wales. Oh, why aren't you here?' Helen got out of bed and went to the window. She stood there, thinking. Penarth was still asleep. The town was silent.

'I can speak French and Italian. People tell me I'm intelligent and pretty. What am I afraid of? The job won't be very difficult.'

It's a wonderful chance to travel and see more of Europe! Italy!

Greece! Turkey! I can't stay here in Penarth. But. . . 'She went back to the table by the bed and looked at the photograph again. She loved Tom. She was sure.

'But does he really love me? He's only phoned once since that

Wonderful day on the beach. Perhaps he's waiting to get a job.

Then, perhaps he'll ask me to marry him. Perhaps. . . 'She lay down on the bed again but couldn't stop thinking. Did she really want to take twelve people across Europe in a small bus?

'Perhaps it'll be fun. Or perhaps it'll be terrible. And can I really do a job like that? There'll be all kinds of different people and different nationalities. Perhaps my friend Jill can help me. I'll go and see her next Thursday. Perhaps. . . 'At last she fell asleep.

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She was in Africa. A man was pointing a gun at her. She was trying to stop him killing a wild animal.

'Helen! There's a phone call for you!' Helen woke up from her dream. Her mother was standing next to her bed.

'It's Tom. He's phoning from Scotland!' she said.

Helen got out of bed, and ran downstairs. She was still dreaming about Africa when she picked up the phone.

'Helen! I've got good news. A big international company has offered me a job!' 'That's wonderful, Tom! I'm so happy for you. When do you start? Is the job in Scotland?' Helen waited for his answer. Perhaps now he wanted her to marry him. There was a short silence.

'No, the job isn't in Scotland,' he said finally.

'Not in Scotland?' There was another silence. Helen knew something was wrong.

Tom was usually quick to tell her everything about himself and his plans.

'No, Helen. This company is all over the world. They. . . 'He began to speak very quickly. 'They want me to go to Australia.'

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.. Helen was very surprised. She was trying to think - to understand. But she couldn't.

'Australia?' 'Yes, they want me to go to Brisbane. Immediately! I'm going to study the use of the sun's heat to warm houses and factories! I have to go to London tomorrow to get a passport! I'm leaving on Saturday.' 'Saturday? Will . . . Will I see you before you go?' Helen asked. She tried to sound calm. 'Isn't he even going to ask me about my plans?' she thought. 'Shall I tell him about my job with Global Tours?'

'Err - no - well - I must go now. I've got a lot of things to do before I go and. . . .
'She waited. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

Again, there was silence.

Helen suddenly realized two things. Tom didn't want to see her, and he wasn't in love with her. She was nearly in tears, but she fought them.

'I've got a job, too. I wanted to talk to you about it. But you're too busy... I'll talk to Jill about it.' 'Yes, Jill's great. She's a good friend. You should phone her. She'll listen. So . . . ' He didn't even ask about the job. Helen waited before she spoke. 'Well, Tom, I hope you have a great life out in Australia.

Write or phone, when you have time.' 'Helen . . . ' 'I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time. Goodbye, Tom.' She went back to her room and threw herself on her bed. 'Tom and I had fun at university,' she thought. 'But now university's finished and we're history. That's it.' She began to cry.

<Chapter 2>

A Day at the Beach

A few days later, Helen caught a bus to Swansea to see Jill. It was the holidays but her friend was still at the university. Jill was studying trees. She wanted to work abroad, but first she had to finish her studies.

It was a sunny day and they decided to go for a walk along the beach. They took off their shoes and walked by the water.

Jill looked at her friend. 'You don't seem very happy, Helen.' 'I've got no job and no money. I'm living in Penarth with my mother, and Tom is flying to Australia today. He didn't even want to see me.'

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'You're really unhappy about Tom, aren't you?' 'Yes,' Helen replied. 'Jill, I need to ask you something. It's about going to Australia. Shall I go and look for a job near him?' 'Run after him, you mean?' 'Err - no. Not exactly....' Jill looked at Helen. It was a long, hard look. 'Oh, it looks like that, doesn't it?' Helen said quickly.

'Yes,' Jill answered. 'You know I've always been honest with you, Helen.' Helen picked up a large white stone and threw it into the sea.

'Let's look at you,' Jill said. 'You can speak French and Italian.

You're very intelligent. You have lovely fair hair, blue eyes and a pretty face. You're also a good friend. You're - usually - happy, and you love life.' 'Well...'
'But you just want a boyfriend.' 'Yes, you're right.' Helen kicked at the sand. Some sea birds suddenly flew up from the rocks. 'But don't all women think about boyfriends?' 'Helen, we're young. We're intelligent. Life is more than marriage and children. Perhaps you should think about yourself.

Who is Helen? I think she's a great woman.' Helen was silent for a few minutes. The sea birds cried above them. The sun disappeared behind some clouds, and the sky looked grey and dark.

'But I want to have a husband - and a family. Well, I think I do.' 'But Helen, have you ever really thought about it? Marriage and children aren't everything. You can use your languages, and get a good job. You give everything to your boyfriends, and they don't give anything to you. They take from you. They don't respect you. You're not going to like this. . . 'Jill stopped.

'I want to know, Jill. Tell me.'

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'You're their mother.' 'Their mother?' Helen screamed.

Jill took Helen by the hand and danced around the beach with her.

'Mum! Mum!' she shouted. She wanted Helen to laugh.

Then Helen smiled. 'I'm not, Jill. That's not true.' 'Yes it is. Look at you and Tom. You cooked his meals, you washed his clothes, and you did his shopping. You listened to his problems. That's exactly what his mother does. Be yourself, Helen.' 'Myself? I thought I was.' Helen pushed her long fair hair away from her face. There was a strong wind now. 'You have a boyfriend!' She was feeling sorry for herself, and she was also beginning to feel quite angry with Jill.

'But I don't give all my time to him. I'm not always there when he needs me... Not all the time. I need time for myself. I don't cook him beautiful meals. I tell him to cook for me!' Helen smiled. 'Oh, yes, I remember! What a dinner! Boiled eggs, boiled vegetables and half-cooked rice! Erg!' They both laughed.

'The world is changing, Helen. It needs women who are strong and independent. It needs women who have careers. We can change the world. We must change the world!' 'Yes, you're right.' Helen thought for a second and then turned to Jill. 'Are you angry with men?' 'Angry? No, I'm not angry with men. But they're not going to decide what I should do.' 'What do you think I should do, Jill?' 'Why not take this job? You speak French and Italian perfectly.

You're good at making friends with people.' 'I'll be a good tour guide, won't I?' 'Yes!' Jill looked at her. 'Why don't you go to an astrologer?' 'An astrologer? Do you believe in astrology, Jill?' Helen asked.

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'Well. . . I went to an astrologer once, and she did a chart for me. She's very good. I found out a lot about myself from her. If you see her, perhaps you'll find out something about yourself and your future.' 'OK. Why not!' Helen agreed. She felt happier.

'I've got a present for you.' Jill gave her a brightly-coloured packet.

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Helen carefully took the coloured paper off. It was a plate, with some writing on it.

'Read it!' Jill said, smiling happily.

"'Be true to yourself",' Helen read.

She looked at her friend, and they both smiled.

<Chapter 3>

The Astrologer

Helen took her diary from the table next to her bed. She began to write.

July 9th Dear Diary, I'm glad I went to see Jill. But I don't agree with everything that she said. Tom hasn't phoned me, but he has phoned his mother. She rang and told me. I felt very hurt. I miss him.

But I've decided to take the job with Global Tours. So I'll be a tour guide... I'm going to take twelve people, between eighteen and forty, around Europe. Who knows? Perhaps I'll meet an interesting man and live in a big house in Italy.

Oops! I mustn't let Jill read this diary!

I'm not going to think about Tom! I'm not!

July 10th Tom still hasn't written. Shall I phone his mother? Why not?

Later:

Why did I do that? Why did I ring? I'm even unhappy now.

Tom has phoned her twice. Twice! But no call for me! He's living in a wonderful flat in Brisbane and has already made some friends. Perhaps he's found a new girlfriend, too.

I think I'll go to that astrologer on Monday.

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A few days later, Helen knocked on the door of a small house in a dark, narrow street. The sign on the door said Lisa Collins.

Astrologer.

Helen imagined Lisa. 'She'll have long black hair, and a lot of gold or silver, and brightly-coloured clothes.' A woman of about thirty-five came to the door, wearing jeans and a blue shirt. And she wasn't wearing any gold or silver.

'Hi. I'm Lisa. Come in. Would you like a cup of tea?' Helen looked around the flat before she sat down. It was large, with a lot of space.

Lisa gave her a cup with Sagittarius on it.

'Thank you for sending me your birth date: December the sixth. You're a Sagittarius. You like fun and parties and being with people,' Lisa said.

'That's true,' Helen answered. She began to feel calmer. Lisa was a dice woman.

Then Lisa showed Helen her astrology chart. 'You're the only person with a chart like this. Every person's is completely different,' she explained.

Helen listened carefully when Lisa started talking about different planets: Venus, Mars, Uranus, and Jupiter.

'Now, let's see: you've got Venus in Scorpio.' 'Is that bad?' 'Nothing is good or bad. It just means that you've got problems. With boyfriends! You always choose the wrong man.'

You choose the same kind every time. Proud I: 1len, full of their own importance. Men with secrets.' Helen looked hard at the astrologer. 'Yes, 'you're right. But what can I do about it?' 'Be more careful. Try to understand what you're doing. You can solve the problem, but it won't be easy.' 'Oh,' Helen said. She didn't like what Lisa was telling her.

'Don't worry. You'll be all right.' The astrologer smiled. 'Now,

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Let's see what's going to happen in the next few months. Hmm.

You're going to travel and meet new people.' 'Yes! I've got a job as a tour guide.' 'But Pluto is here. Pluto means secrets. Dark secrets. Deep secrets.' 'Secrets? My secrets?' 'I don't know. But be careful. Perhaps secret things will happen.' 'A secret love?' 'I don't know. It's too difficult to say exactly. But it's going to be a good time for you in many ways. You'll learn something important about yourself and your feelings.' 'Can you tell me more?' 'Yes; Lisa said. 'You like travelling, so I'd like to draw another chart for you. This will be a map of the world at the time when you were born. It will show where all the planets were at exactly that minute. For example, if your Jupiter line goes through Russia, perhaps you'll have good luck in Russia.' 'I'm not really sure what she means by a "Jupiter line",' thought Helen. 'Is there a "Venus line"?' Venus means love. Perhaps my Venus line goes through Greece and Turkey, or Italy. Will I find love there?' Before Helen could ask about Venus, Lisa suddenly said, 'I want to tell you something important! You'll get your chance of a lifetime this year.' 'My chance of a lifetime?' Helen repeated.

'Yes, the thing that you really want to happen. It will change your life.' 'Really? That's wonderful. Maybe I'll find a good-looking boyfriend.' Helen was excited.

Lisa looked at her for a long time. 'Is that what you want?'

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July 18th

Dear Diary, Tom went to Australia three weeks ago. I wait for the postman every day and listen for the phone, but there's nothing. Well- I must just forget him!

Perhaps Jill's right: there's more to life than a boyfriend. But all my school friends here in Penarth are married. I'm lonely. Very lonely. I need to have friends around me.

July 30th

A letter from Global Tours! I'm going to London on Saturday for a week's course. Then on 15th August the tour starts.

Still nothing from Tom. Mrs Jones at the post office told me to be very careful when I go to Europe. She thinks it's a dangerous place. Some people have a wonderful imagination!

Lisa has sent me my special world chart. It looks very interesting. I must study it when I have more time. I'm still worried about my new job. Will I be a good tour guide? I hope so. Perhaps this is my chance of a lifetime.