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THE I

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THE IRISH TIMES

A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

**T**o come

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Cunningham', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM**

Publisher

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*The Great*  
**PHOENIX**  
*of London*

**LINDSAY GALVIN**



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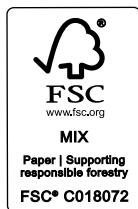
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*To my sister Kathryn, who would  
always climb in a tar barrel with me,  
even though she'd hate it.*

Also by Lindsay Galvin

*Call of the Titanic*

*Darwin's Dragons*

*My Friend the Octopus*

*Mighty talke there  
is of this Comet that is  
seen a'nights;*

DIARY OF SAMUEL PEPYS,  
17TH DECEMBER 1664







## PROLOGUE

*29th December 1664*

**I**t was a crisp night, the sky a sheet of black ice, waiting to be shattered.

Sleepy with fire-warmth and rich food, I snuggled between my mother and father on the doorstep of my grandparents' house and glassworks business on Pudding Lane. They were saying long goodbyes to the rest of my family: Grandfather, Grandmother, Uncle Martyne, Aunt Susan and my young cousin Roland. I lived with my parents on the other side of the City of London, where Mother and Father ran a successful bookbinding business together.

‘God rest Merrie England,’ sang Father, covering a belch.

My Uncle Martyne emitted an even louder belch and the dark-haired brothers broke into laughter, arms draped around each other’s shoulders.

‘Time for a bit less merrie, and more rest,’ said Grandfather.

‘Now there’s the pot calling the kettle black,’ said Grandmother, hugging his arm.

Aunt Susan pressed a package into Mother’s hand.

‘We have enough, Susie, *zut alors* we’ll go burst!’ said Maman. When Mother was tired or stressed, more French words would slip into her speech, her accent stronger.

I yawned, growing impatient of the adult chatter and wishing for my bed, when I realized something – someone – was missing.

Where was cousin Roly?

I broke free of the tangle of laughing adults and spotted the small but sturdy figure stomping down Pudding Lane, head tilted up, staring at the sky.

‘Roly? Roly!’ I ran off after the surprisingly swift two-year-old, relieved there were no carts at this time of night.

‘Look. Star!’ Roly pointed up as I gained on him.

‘Roland – watch where you’re going!’ I called. What

was the silly baby staring at? He was going to fall flat on his face.

Then I gasped and stopped still as I spotted it. Grandfather was a glassmaker of high renown and made some of the best lenses used in the telescopes used at sea, so I was used to looking at the stars.

This however was no ordinary star. It was new and slashed open the night with its sharp tail. The glow was so bright the sky around it darkened, as if the commonplace stars were standing back to make way for a gleaming visitor.

My stomach roiled. Could it be bad luck to look at it? I turned to see my family all gazing upwards.

‘Roly, you little rascal!’ said Aunt Susan as she finally noticed her escapee still bowling down the street. I tore my attention from the sky and darted forward, determined to reach Roly before he tripped.

‘I read about this in the broadside only yesterday, a new blazing star spotted by sailors—’

A noise interrupted Grandfather, a screech that I also felt as a buzz deep inside my head, followed by an almighty—

*Whoosh – BOOM!*

Vibrations shuddered up my legs.

A cloud of dust engulfed Pudding Lane.

My little cousin was gone.

Windows flew open in the tall houses either side of the lane, then quickly slammed shut against the mushrooming dust.

‘Roland!’ I ran forward into the dark cloud that had gobbled up the little boy, pressing my nose and mouth against the inside of my elbow to block the grit.

As the air cleared, I made out Roly, he was staggering towards a glowing rock, round as a cannonball. It sat in a crater as deep as the tin bath at home, as if a giant’s spoon had scooped a hole out of the street.

Was it an actual cannonball? Had the Dutch war come to London?

‘Ball,’ said Roland, running towards the edge of the pit.

I darted forward and snatched him up, his warm wriggling body tight against my chest. ‘No, Roly, no touch. It’s hot.’

The toddler’s face crumpled, and he tried to wriggle out of my grip, leaning towards the glowing sphere, almost knocking me off balance. The ball now glowed only faintly red, quickly cooling.

I was relieved when strong hands snatched my squirming cousin out of my arms.

The adults of my family now gathered around the pit. Mother’s hand gripped mine, and I felt the weight of Father’s arm across my shoulders. We all stared at the rock in its crater. It now seemed much smaller, about

double the size of a cooking apple. Dust rested on its surface.

*'Sacré bleu!*' muttered Mother. 'The war—'

'Fret not, Elinor, we would have heard the cannon fire if that were the case,' said Father.

'That's right, son,' said Grandfather. 'This is no shot. I have heard of this, although never in London. I think what we have here is a heaven-stone. Fallen from the heavenly bodies.'

A heaven-stone. I mouthed the unfamiliar word. 'Did it come from the blazing star?'

'It does seem a coincidence,' said Grandfather.

'A portent . . .' Aunt Susan whispered. 'Disaster to come . . .' Uncle Martyne made the sign of the cross, and she gasped and grabbed his arm, Roly on her hip, snuggled into her neck.

The street was now quiet and silvery clouds scudded across the new blazing star. My family looked from the rock, now cooled to a deep grey, and back up at the sky. *Was* it a portent? Everyone spoke of omens since we'd been at war with the Dutch. One by one my family crossed themselves and I followed suit. The air of superstition was broken by Grandmother.

'Fiddle-faddle. I don't think it came from the sky at all, you've all had far too much plum pottage. It's been thrown out of a top casement by one of the neighbours.'

Grandmother planted her hands on her hips, eyes narrowed. ‘I’d bet on the Farriners.’

This didn’t make any sense to me; I’d heard that noise as the rock plummeted from the sky – but I didn’t contradict Grandmother. Not when it seemed a lot safer to believe her.

‘Come on, Gil, it’s way past midnight, let’s get you home,’ said Father. He ducked down so I could climb up on to his shoulders. I pressed my cheek to the top of his head. His hair smelt of leather, paper, fire smoke. Father grunted as he straightened up. My legs reached midway down his chest. Even though I was small for nine years old, I’d soon be too big for Father’s shoulders. I didn’t like to think about that.

As we finally set off down the lane, Roland began to wail.

‘Fire ball mine. Mine—’

‘Richard, bring that infernal rock inside, for the sake of peace,’ Grandmother told Grandfather. ‘Now come, Susan, let’s get this infant settled.’

One of the windows way up high creaked open.

‘Take your racket inside, Mistress Knight, some are trying to get their godly rest,’ called out a man’s voice.

‘Keep your nose in your bread, Farriner,’ snapped Grandmother. ‘You still owe me a loaf, don’t think I’ve forgotten.’

The casement slammed shut.

I took one last look behind me, as we rounded the corner. Aunt Susan was following Father's parents inside, a sleepy Roly on her hip. Uncle Martyne cradled the heaven-stone and it looked heavy. He gave me a wave before closing the door behind him.

The crater the stone had left behind now didn't seem especially different from the everyday pits and troughs of Pudding Lane.

Even the new blazing star seemed to settle into its place in the sky.

1664

*Threatening the world with  
famine, plague and war.*

*To Princes, death!*

*To Kingdoms, many crosses.*

*To all estates, inevitable losses.*

*To Herdsmen, rot.*

*To ploughmen, hapless seasons.*

*To sailors, storms.*

*To cities, civil treasons.*

JOHN GADBURY (LONDON, 1665) DE COMETIS





# DAY 1:

SUNDAY 2ND  
SEPTEMBER 1666



THE CITY OF  
**LONDON**



- 
- 1 PUDDING LANE
  - 2 DICE QUAY
  - 3 BLACK SWAN ALLEY
  - 4 POULTRY COMPTER
  - 5 MERCERS' HALL
  - 6 PATERNOSTER ROW
  - 7 ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL
  - 8 THE TOWER
  - 9 EAST SMITHFIELD

DAY 1:  
SUNDAY 2<sup>nd</sup>  
SEPTEMBER 1666

*And among other things,  
the poor pigeons,  
I perceive, were loth  
to leave their houses,  
but hovered about the windows  
and balconys till  
they were, some of them burnt,  
their wings, and  
fell down.*

DIARY OF SAMUEL PEPYS,  
SUNDAY 2ND SEPTEMBER 1666



## CHAPTER ONE

**A**re you sure you have had enough, Gilber?’ said Mother, her French accent skipping the ‘t’ from the end of my name. A fork full of meat hovered above the joint.

‘Quite enough, Maman,’ I said.

‘*Zut alors*, this heat,’ she said. Chestnut ringlets sprung out from where she’d combed her hair straight from a middle parting. She lifted her heavier curls at the back and fanned her neck with her hand. I sympathized. I had the same curls as she did and they clung hot to my head.

Maman seemed in no great hurry, but for me Sunday

lunch seemed to last for ever. It was hardly the weather for roasted meat, but Hugh Hartwell, who happened also to be my Latin master, had taken to delivering a ridiculously huge joint every Sunday morning. Unfortunately for me, he'd also taken to delivering himself to help us eat it.

Master Hartwell had to be about the only person in London not bothered by the heat. He had a long face some might call handsome, and wore his wavy pale hair brushed across his ample forehead. He reminded me of an amiable horse that was a little too proud of itself.

'*Non possum appellare* a cart,' said Hartwell, tapping his spoon against the table with each word.

He was speaking Latin again, and I tried not to roll my eyes. Of course I could translate perfectly well and I didn't need him to call me a cart.

'No thank you, sir,' I said, same as I always did.

I knew Hartwell wanted me to reply in Latin, but lately I had been stubbornly refusing. The fact I spoke French often with Mother, and Latin was similar, meant I was probably his best student, but his praise was so tiresome. Every Sunday of summer he'd walked us back from church and stayed for dinner. Every. Week. Surely Maman could see what a bore he was?

'We'll have to start you on Greek soon, young scholar,' said Hartwell. 'The language of Pythagoras, and of

course the Greek myths.’

‘Oh, Hugh . . .’ said Maman, flicking him playfully with a cloth, ‘not everyone wishes to devour languages as you do. Let the boy be.’

When the meal was finally over, Mother wrapped the rest of the joint in linen for me to carry in my satchel. There was always plenty of left-over meat for me to take to my grandparents on Pudding Lane, and invariably I would stay the night there.

Hugh Hartwell patted the case of his lute in a way I found almost threatening. But Maman was smiling with her eyes at him, and I hadn’t seen that expression since the plague took Father. I wasn’t sure whether I loved or hated her happiness around my Latin master, but the feeling was too strong to be anything in between.

I was even more pleased than usual to skip down the stairs, across the floorboards of the book bindery – now run by Maman, and closed for business on Sundays – and out on to our street, Paternoster Row. St Paul’s Cathedral loomed over the houses, one street away from ours. It should have cast a cooling shadow at this time of day, but the heat refused to budge even when the sun was blocked. The only difference between the sweltering inside and the sweltering outside was the smells. Outside it was animals, dung, woodsmoke. Inside, glue and paper, ink, lavender, with Hartwell’s scent an unwelcome

addition: beeswax polish, that reminded me of the oak desks in the school room.

I shifted the satchel strap on my shoulder and skipped around a mound of horse manure the street pickers hadn't yet fought over.

Maman would be waiting at the window for me to wave and I deliberately didn't turn. She'd be laughing with Hartwell anyway, I thought; he'd be playing the lute and she'd sing. I made a sick sound in the back of my throat. But Maman always watched from the casement until I turned the corner. She'd done the same for Father. At the thought of Father, my tight shoulders slumped.

I knew in my heart that she wouldn't have forgotten, and felt her eyes on my back.

Bother it. I knew what Father would have wanted. As I reached the end of the street, I turned and waved. The notes of Hartwell's lute travelled through the air as Maman waved back.

By the time I reached Pudding Lane, the leather bag with its cargo of Sunday joint was uncomfortably warm against my hip and my shirt clung to me. I dodged a cart with a group of children hanging off the back. They'd probably been to the country to see their family on their half day off. And now I was going to see mine.

Before the Great Plague, just over a year ago, we



would have eaten our meal after church together, either at Paternoster Row or Pudding Lane. Everything changed when first Father, then Aunt Susan and Uncle Martyne had been taken by the plague. I didn't like to think too much of the before time, when we had been a big family. Our rooms above the book bindery were too quiet without Father.

I knew whole families had died, so many thought us lucky.

But it was hard to feel it.

I knocked on the door, then stepped back to see my cousin Roland's smudged face appear in the diamond-shaped panes of the window above. The windowpanes of Knight's Glassworks and the rooms above were the finest on Pudding Lane, and only slightly warped his features. The black criss-crossed leading was frequently replaced, so I couldn't hear what Roland was calling.

But I could see it was my name. And I could feel the warmth of his joy and the thud of his steps down the stairs.

'Gibbie!' Roland flung open the door and leapt into my arms. Grandfather chuckled, from the dim interior of the shop.