Opening extract from

Goldseekers

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THE FINDER

My name is Jude Lanyon and I was born in Cornwall in the year in which they cut the head off a king and turned the natural order of the world upside down.

My father objected that Jude was the patron saint of lost things and not a fair name to give a lad, but my mother reasoned that if Jude was the patron saint of the lost then it must be because he was able to find. "Besides, I've seen his future. The boy is destined to be a finder, and a rich man. Giving him what others consider an ill-fated name will balance matters nicely and save him from envy."

My father smiled and shrugged: her claim sounded outlandish, but he knew his wife was no ordinary woman. When I was seven, our neighbour Susan Tamblin told me that she was a witch. She said it quietly, her eyes as round as platters, and I could tell she believed the gossip. I laughed at her, but when I went home that night and asked Mam outright, she pursed her lips.

"I prefer to be called a wise woman," she said. "I do nothing that would do harm to another living being."

She could tell the coming weather by the shadows in the grass, and cure ailments with poultices and potions. She would often sit silently of an evening with a bowl of water from the stream above the cottage balanced on the table in front of her, looking into its still depths for hours. Then she would pronounce, "Zebedee Rowse will win the wrestling contest in Truro," or "Mary Jago's baby will be a boy." Sometimes she would frown and put the bowl aside with a sigh. She would go outside into our little kitchen-garden and pick herbs and plants and spend hours making tinctures. Then she would gather up her knapsack and set off into the darkness, staff in hand, and go straight to the door of the person who had fallen ill, the person she had scried by magic in the water. How many lives she saved like this in our corner of Cornwall I do not know, but the mere mention of the name of Constance Lanyon had the power to bring a smile to the lips of people from Land's End to Helston town.

She had many other ways of seeing the future: she could read it in the lines on a person's hand or in the patterns made by the leaves in the bottom of a cup of tea, a new luxury from the East that had yet to find favour even among the aristocrats of our country, let alone poor country folk like us. We were far from rich and we had not bought the tea; and thereby hangs a tale.

The night the East India Company brigantine called the *Lady Catherine* was wrecked on the rocks of Cape Cornwall we were waiting for it, along with our neighbours. Mam

had "seen" the ship come to grief in a dream, and spied through the clouds that roiled above the sea the sliver of moon that showed her the exact day of the month this event would take place. As the wind howled and the storm battered the shore we pulled the sailors from the waves, some alive and some dead, or as good as, though there were some who muttered that to save them was to draw the Devil's curse, for stealing a soul that was promised to him. The cargo came rolling in on the breakers: great wooden chests that were smashed and splintered on the rocks; bales of coloured fabrics that all came out of the water looking black. Only a couple of chests survived the storm, and inside those there were jars of tea and great pots of pepper and spice. The locals were not greatly interested in the tea (they did not know what it was), but the pepper and spices could be sold in the markets, and cloth was always of use, once you'd dried it out.

This incident served to reinforce my mother's reputation for uncanny knowledge. But what no one outside our family knew was that it was not only spoiled silk and waterlogged goods that we had found. Drawn by an urge I could not explain, or even describe except to say that the palms of my hands itched and my nose twitched like a dog that had scented sausages that might be stolen, I had waded into the crashing surf. I stood there for a moment, sneezing violently, then reached down and laid hands on a small, oblong object. It was heavy: I fairly staggered under the weight of it. I stood there with the sea sucking at my knees,

gazing down at my find. It was a small wooden lockbox, very beautifully made, its carvings inlaid with some shiny white stuff that picked up the moonlight.

I went running back to Da and showed it to him. He gave a low whistle, then took the box from me. I saw how surprised he was by its weight: he almost dropped it. Then he wrapped some of the cloth around it and bent his head down close to mine. "This is just the sort of box someone would keep treasure in," he whispered, and put a finger to his lips.

The walk back up the cliff seemed to take an age. I could not wait to get back to our cottage and open the box. As soon as we were there, Da lit the lantern and set the box down on the table and we all gathered around it.

"That's ivory, that is," Mam said, tracing a long finger over the white patterns.

I watched the passage of her finger and saw that the decorations were of animals, animals for which I had no name. They had long, long noses which stretched out and wrapped themselves around the tail of the animal in front, so that they walked in a linked line. I thought they were wonderful.

Da said they were "elephants". It was not a word I knew, but somehow it conjured up exotic foreign places to me. "Where do elephants come from, Da?" I asked, for as far as I knew there were no such things as elephants in Kernow. Cats and dogs and jackdaws and magpies; horses and cows, sheep and foxes and rabbits and rodents; but no elephants.

He had to admit he did not know, precisely; but Mam dropped me a wink. "Some come from India," she said quietly. "But the ones with really big ears, they come from Africa."

"Open it, Da," I breathed.

But it was locked, and there was no key. Da took out his knife and after some careful effort prised the box open. Within lay a dull brown oilcloth, but inside this were coins – pistoles and ducats, thalers and doubloons, crusados and pieces of eight – some gold, many silver and a few in other metals: all sorts of coins from all over the world, Da declared after some examination.

My parents gazed at each other. "You see," Mam said at last, ruffling my hair. "It may have taken nine years to prove me right, but he's a finder, all right."