

Meantime in Greenwich by Hannah Keens (excerpt)

Chapter One

So much for the trusty old London Underground. The Jubilee line train had been stuck for a sweltering half an hour while Stella McElhone checked and rechecked the time. When they eventually chugged into Westminster, the driver announced over a tinny-sounding tannoy that the train was terminating and the whole line was being suspended. Passengers were advised to change to the Circle and District lines. Determined not to spend another minute trapped below ground, Stella shot out of the train and legged it up the escalators, barely noticing the brutalist architecture in the deep well of the station. Once out of that austere environment, she bolted towards the River Thames, just in time to catch the river bus from Westminster Pier. It would take a good forty minutes, but short of an act of piracy, the boat would at least get her to Greenwich on time.

The impromptu summer-evening jaunt proved to be a delight, with the London skyline reeling past, only not quickly enough for her liking. Once the boat moved downriver from the London Eye, it took an age for St Paul's Cathedral and the Shard to pass from sight, but then the boat moved beneath Tower Bridge and at last gathered pace as it navigated the loops and bends of the river that separated north and south London.

When the twin domes of the old naval hospital hove into view, Stella knew Greenwich was close. On arrival there, she disembarked and dashed along the pier into a lovely borough of south-east London. She ran towards the park, her dark hair swinging behind her. That evening, she was attending a night sky showing at the planetarium, with a lecture afterwards from a visiting astronomer. Her destination was only about half a mile away, but if she didn't get a move on, she'd be late and make a bad entrance.

At the other side of the leafy park, she reached a hill, graced with the seventeenth century Royal Observatory. This then, was the home of Greenwich Mean Time, by which the world had once set its clocks. The observatory resembled a domed palace, its red brick façade burnished by the evening sun. At the top of the hill, Stella stood back to avoid being flattened by a flood of boisterous schoolchildren surging past. Once certain there was no further risk of being trampled, she made her way to the main entrance and had her ticket scanned by an assistant who pointed her in the right direction.

In the courtyard, she paused to catch her breath. Because the observatory was on relatively high ground, she could see a fair amount of the London skyline that she'd just cruised past in the distance. Beneath her feet, she found the unassuming metal strip that represented the prime meridian, which marked nought degrees longitude. She couldn't resist

Meantime in Greenwich by Hannah Keens (excerpt)

taking a minute to place her feet either side of it, so she was standing with one foot in the east and one in the west.

When the novelty wore off, she headed for the planetarium, which stood in stark contrast to the buildings surrounding it, and the modern bronze monolith reminded her of a sawn-off telescope. Inside a light and airy reception area, Stella found her fellow attendees. Despite a few dozen people being present, the place was as quiet as an old library and she felt that even her clothes were too loud. Her pink jumper was positively shouting and drowning out a surprising number of outfits made from tweed. She peeled off her jumper and hung it over one arm. Who would wear tweed in this heat? And such pallor, even in July. These were not people who went outside in the daytime.

By the looks of things, there was no one here under fifty, let alone thirty, and she tried not to look as disappointed as she felt. Life in London was lonesome and she'd hoped to make some new acquaintances. It had been a mad rush to get here, but now she regretted not dawdling and saving herself from what was obviously going to be death by small talk. When a passing waiter came within arm's reach, she swiped a glass of red wine and clutched it for security. It wouldn't matter if she got purple teeth as it was unlikely she'd be smiling at anyone this evening.

One mouthful of wine – all right, three mouthfuls of wine – and she'd force herself to speak to someone. Apart from Ernie the doorman at her building, she hadn't spoken to anyone in real life for days, if not weeks. Fuelled by wine, she approached a trio on her left, which included an elegant blonde woman, who looked reasonably close to her own age. Next to her was a man with loopy brown hair, wearing a corduroy suit in a shade best described as quinoa. Finally, there was a woman clad in a puce knitted dress, complete with a wool scarf wrapped three times around her throat. Something about people interested in astronomy must attract them to warm clothing, which made sense if they spent a lot of their nights outside viewing the sky. Carefully, so as not to startle them, she made her approach.

'Greenwich is a lovely part of London, isn't it?' she said.

'If you like that sort of thing,' said the blonde woman, managing to peer down her nose at Stella, even though they were the same height. 'Now, if you'll excuse us.'

The woman ushered her two companions across the room towards a row of trestle tables covered with pretty canapés. There, the three of them stood, not eating or even looking at the food, and continued their conversation unmolested.

This charming behaviour was not entirely unexpected. Stella had only been in the city for a few weeks but was already getting used to Londoners' way of not speaking to anyone,

Meantime in Greenwich by Hannah Keens (excerpt)

or looking at anyone, unless – or even if – their lives depended on it. She sipped her wine and looked about for other likely targets for her cringe-making opening gambits, but everyone was clustered in tightly drawn conversational knots that made it clear she wouldn't be welcome in any of them.

The prospect of standing about nursing a glass of wine for the next fifteen minutes was not especially appealing. Her best bet would be to lurk in the ladies and check her hair, but she could hardly spin that out for a whole quarter of an hour. Instead, she placed her glass on a nearby table and set off in search of the library.

Years ago, she'd discovered that the first Astronomer Royal had cast a horoscope to determine the best time for the construction of the Royal Observatory, and she wanted to see it in person. Imagine all those astronomers who loathed astrology doing their best work in a building conceived according to astrological principles. There was a copy of the chart on the observatory website, but it would be great to get a look at the real thing, assuming astrologers weren't barred from the library or forced to wear a bell around their necks or something.

An assistant informed her that the archives were held in another building at the opposite side of the park, which had closed some hours ago. Not to worry. Stella soon came up with another idea and made her way to the planetarium entrance, hoping to get in early and take her seat. Plan B was thwarted when she found the doorway barricaded with a red rope suspended over a bright yellow sign informing her that cleaning was in progress.

A quick listen revealed no hint of anyone hovering. Perhaps whoever was in there was quietly peeling chewing gum from underneath seats or removing whatever other sticky detritus schoolchildren were inclined to leave behind them. More likely the sign was just an oversight and the caretakers had long gone. Surely no one would mind if she crept in a bit early. A quick glance over one shoulder confirmed there was no one watching her, and even if anyone did spot her, she had a valid ticket, so it wasn't really trespassing, as such. Before she could change her mind, she stretched out a furtive hand to unhook the red rope.

'Breaking and entering?' said a voice from the dark void beyond. 'You could get six years for that. Fourteen if the judge doesn't like the cut of your jib.'

'Oh!' Stella flinched and withdrew her hand. 'But I haven't broken anything, or even entered, for that matter.'

'I know you haven't.' A man appeared from the darkened room and took the rope from her hand. 'Sorry, just kidding.'

'Very amusing,' said Stella. 'Best not give up the day job just yet. Look, I only wanted to get in ahead of time to avoid that lot.' She tilted her chin towards the other attendees.

Meantime in Greenwich by Hannah Keens (excerpt)

‘These drinks and nibbles things bring me out in a rash.’ As if to prove the point, her face was now burning, partly from being caught red-handed and partly from being in close proximity to this good-looking man. He was tall, with pale blue eyes, nicely set off by a thatch of sandy hair. Even better, he was possibly the only other person present wearing clothes that looked like they’d been purchased in the twenty-first century: a blue cotton shirt, navy jumper and faded jeans. The jumper had a hole at the elbow, which was fraying badly. Was this the mark of a single man, or one married to a woman who took the view – quite rightly – that he could jolly well mend his own jumper, or was he just a man in his work clothes? Evidently, she’d disturbed the caretaker doing a last-minute tidy up before the show.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Where are my manners. Benedict Redman.’

He held out a calloused hand and she shook it. Hopefully, he’d not noticed her looking him up and down.

‘Stella McElhone. Pleased to meet you.’

‘The pleasure is mine. You don’t sound local. Where are you from? The north-east?’

It was too complicated to say that she didn’t really come from anywhere any more, so she opted for the short version.

‘Originally from the north-east, yes. Durham. I’m here for a spot of flat-sitting. Well not *here*, here. I’m in London for flat-sitting purposes. I’m *here*, here for the Saturn lecture.’

If he’d noticed her babbling, he didn’t let on. Impressively polite. Another point in his favour.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘And do you have a particular interest in Saturn?’

Now was neither the time nor the place to discuss the fact that she was here to learn more about the vanishing of Saturn’s rings and the effect that it may or may not have on people’s lives. Many of her astrology clients were in their mid to late twenties and were fast-approaching their Saturn return, and she wasn’t just interested for the sake of her clients, because this character-building planetary transit was one she was soon due to experience first-hand.

One of the more challenging planets, Saturn returned to the same point in people’s birth-charts in their late twenties, again in their late fifties and for a third time in their late eighties. Mercifully, very few people had to suffer four Saturn returns. Aware that Benedict Redman was waiting for an answer, she cautioned herself not to babble again.

‘Oh, well. You know. Not a particular interest in Saturn *per se*. At least no more than any other planet, really, and I’m just as interested in Uranus.’ *Why* had she mentioned

Meantime in Greenwich by Hannah Keens (excerpt)

Uranus? What was wrong with her? ‘They’re all the same to me, planets. So, in conclusion, I’m just an interested bystander.’

The caretaker looked as though he was about to ask her another question, but before he got a chance, he was beckoned by the snooty blonde woman.

‘I’m sorry, Ms McElhone, it was lovely talking to you, but you’ll have to excuse me. I hope you enjoy the lecture, and maybe we’ll have a chance to speak afterwards?’

‘I hope so.’ After her not-so-stellar conversational performance, he’d no doubt keep well away from her if he had any sense.

Idly, she wondered what lay in his horoscope and whether she’d ever get the chance to find out. Obviously, it would be unsubtle to ask someone’s sun sign, but she wasn’t above a bit of sneaky interrogation to get birth details out of interesting people. He had the look and feel of an Aries: tall, fair, confident, friendly and charming, but as he was someone she’d only just met, it was unlikely to be his sun sign she was seeing, and most likely, he’d have an Aries ascendant. The zodiac sign rising over the horizon at birth was just like a front door: an outward portrayal to strangers of what might lie within. Sometimes, an ascendant was a good representation and sometimes completely misleading. In Stella’s experience, many a glossy front door had opened to reveal an absolute slum, and she wasn’t just referring to her flat-sitting career.

As there was no chance to quiz Benedict Redman just now, she observed him at a distance where the blonde woman was berating the poor man. Now, *she* was decidedly leonine, with quite a commanding presence. What she lacked in height, she made up for with her luxuriant mane, upswept to halo her face. Stella would bet her grocery money that this woman had a Leo ascendant. The man only folded his arms and listened attentively, not looking at all contrite. If this woman was his boss, then she felt rather sorry for him.

When a bell sounded, the crowd began moving towards Stella. Since the caretaker was still having his ear bent by the blonde woman, she unhooked the red rope herself, inched around the cleaning sign and walked into the planetarium. She headed for the point furthest from the door and parked herself in a reclining chair. Making sure her phone was switched off occupied a good couple of minutes and ensured she didn’t have to make eye contact with anyone before the show started.

When everyone was seated, the lights dimmed and the room darkened, so she settled back, ready for a relaxing voyage through the universe. As the emerging night sky and the lulling voice of the commentator drew her forwards in space, she found herself slipping back in time to her childhood. To the time her parents had first taken her to a planetarium when

Meantime in Greenwich by Hannah Keens (excerpt)

she was eleven, where she'd sat in awed silence, watching the galaxies spread out overhead. It was one of the last times in her life that she'd been truly happy.

* * *

The show ended and Stella blinked in the rising lights. When her eyes refocused, she looked up to see Benedict Redman smiling over at her, also blinking. Beside him was the blonde woman, who gave him a sideways look. So, they weren't colleagues but a couple. It was too much to hope for, she supposed, to pick up the only man in the building who looked like he might have a pulse, let alone one who made hers race. She should have known he wouldn't be single. Just as well, really. It was pointless getting into anything with anyone when she'd be on the move again in a matter of months. That was the story of her life: she was always on the move again in a matter of months, or sometimes weeks.

Flat-sitting meant she had low overheads and could follow her heart at work instead of doing something she hated in order to pay high rents. On the downside, moving constantly from one end of the country to the other, and sometimes out of the country, also made it all but impossible to put down roots, to make friends or to maintain relationships. But if she was honest with herself, that suited her just fine. Not loving anyone meant not losing anyone ever again.

Reluctantly, she followed the other visitors back to the reception area where there were more drinks and nibbles. She was glad to get another drink after leaving most of her first glass, but she wasn't looking forwards to another attempt at small talk with the tweed brigade. At least they seemed more enthusiastic now they'd been in the planetarium, like children let out of school early, and there was a buzz of conversation instead of the deathly silence she'd walked into on arrival. She helped herself to another glass of red wine and took a good swig.

'I'd be careful of that if I were you, Ms McElhone.'

'What?'

She spun round to see that Benedict Redman had escaped from his blonde companion. She smiled, but tried to do it without using any teeth, knowing they'd be only three shades lighter than the wine itself.

'The Saturn Committee organised their own wine,' he said, angling his head towards a group of men standing nearby, deep in conversation. 'The skinflints could use the leftovers to strip back the floorboards. Go on, spill a drop on the floor and watch it eat the varnish.'

She laughed, showing all her purple teeth. 'It can't be that bad. Besides, I couldn't pretend to know the first thing about wine and only know what I like.'

Meantime in Greenwich by Hannah Keens (excerpt)

‘And what do you like?’

‘Well, it needs to be red. Or, it can be white. Not pink though. Except in an emergency, of course.’

‘Naturally. Any port in a storm, eh?’ He winked at Stella, who laughed overly hard at the mild pun.

‘I suppose I’m not that choosy!’

‘I’ll remember that. Might be useful if I’m ever down on my luck with the ladies!’

‘Don’t make me laugh.’ What a nerve, when his other half was standing only fifteen feet away. And who even said *ladies* any more? It made him sound about ninety.

‘Speaking of which,’ he said, ‘I’d better get a move on. There’s one lady-in-waiting who’s not going to wait any longer.’

With that, Benedict Redman returned to the frowning blonde woman. Honestly, some men. Well, Stella had not come here on a manhunt but to find out more about the physical aspects of Saturn. In astrology, Saturn stood for rules and boundaries, no doubt represented by the colourful rings that circled the planet.

Stella loved working out how what went on in the heavens was reflected down on earth. She’d been thrilled to learn how the ancients had described this correspondence between the celestial and the terrestrial with ‘as above, so below’. There was no longer any need to actually look at the physical stars to work out horoscopes as she had a two-inch-thick ephemeris that listed all the movements of the planets at any given time on any given day. Much loved and well used, it was dog-eared with many loose pages and filled with highlights, underlinings and sticky notes. Her laptop could whizz up a horoscope in a second, and she had various apps on her phone that were just as speedy, but she liked to feel the connection to the stars and the planets, to understand them in their wider context, so she often made horoscopes the old-fashioned way, by referring to her ephemeris, making minute mathematical calculations and drawing her birth charts by hand.

So familiar was she with planetary cycles that if push came to shove, she could work out the ascendant and the approximate planetary positions in her head without breaking a sweat. This wasn’t remotely useful in real life – apart from being a good party trick on the rare occasions she actually attended any parties – but it did mean she was able to analyse people almost instantly armed with the smallest piece of information about their date and time of birth. More importantly, it meant that she had an innate understanding of planetary movements and could see in her mind’s eye how they stood in relation to one another.

Meantime in Greenwich by Hannah Keens (excerpt)

After loitering with her glass of wine for ten minutes, it was a relief when the bell sounded and they were ushered into a side room set aside for the lecture. While she probably knew more about astronomy than the average person in the street, Stella was a total novice in a place like this and she'd be lucky if she understood a tenth of what was said. Greenwich held a revered status in astronomy circles, and she had no plans to reveal that astrology was her sole reason for being here. Cowardly of her, she knew, but she had no desire to be laughed out of any more academic events. The laughter would be polite, but all the more humiliating for that. So, she would drink no more wine, sit near the back and not, under any circumstances, ask even one tiny question.