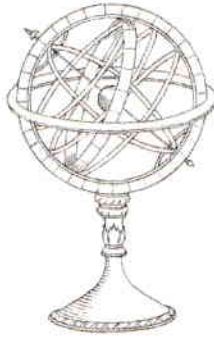


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Atlas

The Story of Pa Salt



**By Lucinda Riley
&
Harry Whittaker**



Foreword

Dear Reader,

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Harry, and I am Lucinda Riley's eldest son. I suspect not, but perhaps it surprised you to see two names on the cover of this long-awaited novel.

Just before the release of *The Missing Sister* in 2021, Lucinda announced that there was to be a surprise eighth and final instalment in the Seven Sisters series, which would tell the tale of the enigmatic Pa Salt. In her Author's Note at the end of the seventh book, she wrote: 'It's been in my head for eight years, and I can't wait to finally get it down on paper.'

Tragically, Mum died in June 2021 following an oesophageal cancer diagnosis in 2017. Perhaps you are speculating that she never had the chance to pen anything. But fate works in mysterious ways. In 2016, Mum was flown over to Hollywood by a production company who were interested in acquiring the film rights to the Seven Sisters. As such, the team were desperate to know how she saw the series ending—four books ahead of schedule.

The process forced Mum to assemble her fragmented thoughts in a document. She wrote thirty pages of script dialogue for the potential producers, which take place at the climax of the series' narrative. I'm sure I don't need to persuade you that those pages were predictably magnificent; packed with drama, suspense...and an enormous surprise.

In addition to this, fans of the series will know that Pa Salt cameos in each book. Mum kept a timeline of the character's movements across the decades, forming a comprehensive spotter's guide. In these ways, Lucinda got more 'down on paper' than she ever gave herself credit for.

In 2018, Mum and I created the Guardian Angels series for children, and co-authored four books. During this time, she asked me to complete the Seven Sisters series if the worst were to happen. Our conversations will always remain private, but I wish to stress that I was a fail-safe put in place in case of the unthinkable. And unthinkable it was. I don't believe that Mum ever really considered that she would actually die, and neither did I. Several times, she somehow defied the laws of science and nature to bounce back from the brink. But then, Mum was always a little bit magic.

After her death, there was no question that I would keep my word. Many people have asked about the pressure of the task. Ultimately, *Atlas* promises to reveal secrets that have kept readers guessing for a decade. However, I've always seen the process as a tribute. I've completed the task for my best friend and my hero. In that way, there's been no pressure at all, and it's proved to be a labour of love. I predict that some will naturally

obsess over which plot elements are Mum's and which are mine, but I don't think that's important. Put simply, the story is the story. And I know you will be emotionally satisfied at the end of this book. Mum has made sure of that.

Arguably Lucinda's greatest achievement is that no one has correctly identified the secret driving force behind the series—and there have been thousands of theories. *Atlas* will reward those who have loved the novels since the beginning, but there is a new story to tell, too (although it's always been there, hidden quietly amongst the first 4,500 pages). Perhaps all I'm doing is removing the smokescreen...

Working on *Atlas: The Story of Pa Salt* has been the challenge and privilege of a lifetime. It is Lucinda Riley's parting gift, and I am so excited to deliver it.

Harry Whittaker, 2023

*Prologue**Tobolsk, Siberia, 1925*

As the bitter wind whipped up a flurry of snow before them, the two young boys pulled their thinning fur coats tightly around their faces.

‘Come on!’ cried the elder of the pair. Although he had just turned eleven, his voice already possessed a gruff, husky quality. ‘That’s enough. Let’s get back home.’

The younger boy—only seven—picked up the pile of firewood they had been collecting and ran after the older boy, who was already striding away.

When they were halfway home, the children became aware of a faint cheeping noise coming from the trees. The older boy stopped in his tracks.

‘Do you hear that?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ replied the small boy. His arms were aching from the weight of the wood, and although they had been still for just a moment, he had started to shiver. ‘Can we get home, please? I’m tired.’

‘Don’t whine,’ the older boy snapped. ‘I’m going to investigate.’ He made his way to the base of a nearby birch and knelt down. Reluctantly, the smaller boy followed behind.

Before them, wriggling helplessly on the hard ground, was a baby sparrow no bigger than a rouble.

‘He’s fallen from the nest,’ the older boy sighed. ‘Or, I wonder...listen.’ The pair stood still in the snow, and eventually heard a high-pitched call from above. ‘Aha! That’s a cuckoo.’

‘The bird from the clock?’

‘Yes. But they are not friendly creatures. The cuckoo lays its eggs in the nests of other birds. Then, when the chick hatches, it pushes the other babies out.’ He sniffed. ‘That’s what’s happened here.’

‘Oh no.’ The smaller boy bent down and used his little finger to gently stroke the bird’s head. ‘It’s all right, friend, we’re here now.’ He looked up at his companion. ‘Maybe if we climb the tree, we can put him back.’ The boy attempted to spot the nest. ‘It must be very high up.’ Suddenly, there was a

sickening crunch from the forest floor. He looked down to see that the older boy had crushed the chick under his boot.

‘What have you done?’ the small boy cried in horror.

‘The mother wouldn’t have accepted it. Best to kill it now.’

‘But...you don’t know that.’ Tears began to prick the boy’s brown eyes. ‘We could have tried.’

The elder of the pair put his hand up to dismiss the protestations. ‘There is no point in trying when something is doomed to failure. That is simply a waste of time.’ He continued down the hill. ‘Come on. Let’s get back.’

The younger boy bent down to look at the lifeless chick. ‘I’m sorry about my brother,’ he sobbed. ‘He is in pain. He didn’t mean to do this.’

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The Diary of Atlas

1928–29





Boulogne-Billancourt, Paris, France

The diary is a present from Monsieur and Madame Paul Landowski. They say that because I don't speak, yet they know that I can write, it would be a good idea if I tried to note down things that I think. At first, they thought I was just plain stupid, that I had lost my wits, which in many ways I have. Or more accurately, perhaps I have just exhausted them, having lived by them for so long. They are very tired, and so am I.

The reason they know that I at least have some sense left is because they asked me to write. To begin with, they tried to make me write my name, age and where I had come from, but I learnt long ago that writing such things on paper can get you into trouble, and trouble is something I want no more of ever again. So, I sat at the table in the kitchen and copied out a piece of poetry that Papa had taught me. Of course, it was one that would not betray where I came from before I arrived under a hedge in their garden. Nor was it one of my favourites, but I felt the words suited my mood, and were enough to show this kind couple—whom fate had thrown in my path when death was knocking at my door—that I could communicate. So I wrote:

*Tonight I've watched
the moon and then
the Pleiades
go down*

*The night is now
half-gone; youth
goes; I am
in bed alone*

I wrote it in French, English and German, none of which was the language I'd used since I'd been old enough to talk (which I can, of course,

but just like words on paper, anything spoken—especially in haste—can be used as currency). I admit to enjoying the look of surprise on Madame Landowski's face as she read what I'd written, even if it wasn't helpful to her in discovering who I was, or who I belonged to. Elsa the maid had a look in her eye which suggested that I should be posted back to where I had come from as soon as possible when she slammed down a bowl of food in front of me.

Not speaking is no hardship. It is over a year since I left the home I had known for as long as I could remember. In that time, I've only used my voice when absolutely necessary.

From where I am writing this, I can look out of the tiny attic window. Earlier, I watched the Landowski children come up the path. They had been to school and looked very smart in their uniforms—Françoise in white gloves and a straw hat they call a boater, and her brothers in white shirts and blazers. Even if I hear Monsieur Landowski complaining often about his lack of money, the big house, his lovely garden and the beautiful dresses that the ladies of the house wear tell me he must be very rich indeed.

I've also chewed my pencil, a habit Papa tried to prevent me from continuing by putting all sorts of terrible flavours on the end of it. He once told me the day's flavour tasted quite nice but was poison, so if I put it anywhere near my mouth, I would die. Yet still, as I thought about the translation he'd given me to decipher, into my mouth the pencil had gone. I'd heard a scream as he'd seen me, and I'd been taken outside by the scruff of the neck and my mouth packed with snow, which I then had to spit out. I didn't die, but I've often wondered since whether it was just a harsh ruse to shock me into stopping or whether the snow and the spitting had saved me.

Even though I do my best to remember him, it is so many years since I last saw him and he is fading from my mind...

Perhaps it is for the best. Yes, best in every way that I forget everything that has gone before. Then, if they torture me, I will have nothing to tell them. And if Monsieur or Madame Landowski think that I shall write things down in the diary they have so kindly given me, trusting to the little lock with a key that I can keep in my leather pouch, then they are sorely mistaken.

'A diary is a place in which you can write down anything you feel or think,' Madame Landowski had explained gently. 'It is also a place of privacy, for your eyes only. I promise that we shall never look.'

I had nodded profusely, then smiled my gratitude with my eyes, before running upstairs to my attic bedroom. I do not believe her. I know from experience how both locks and promises can be so easily broken.

I promise on your beloved mother's life that I shall return for you... Pray for me, wait for me...

I am shaking my head, trying to lose the memory of Papa's last words to me. Yet somehow, even though others I wish to recall float like dandelion

seeds away from my brain's grasp the minute I try to harness them, that sentence will not budge whatever I do.

Still, the diary is leather-bound, and full of the thinnest of paper. It must have cost the Landowskis at least a franc (which is what they call their money here), and it was, I think, a gesture made to help me, so I shall use it. Besides, even though I have learnt not to talk, I often wondered on my long journey whether I might forget how to write. Having no paper or pencil with me, one of the ways I'd get through those freezing winter nights was to recite passages of poetry in my head, then imagine writing the letters in 'my mind's eye'.

I very much like that phrase—Papa had called it the window to our imagination and when I wasn't reciting poetry, I would often disappear into that cavernous place that Papa said contained no boundaries. It was as large as you wished it to be. Small-minded men, he'd added, had, by definition, a limited imagination.

And even if the kind Landowskis were proving to be my human saviours, tending to the outer me, I still needed to disappear inside myself, screw my eyes up tight and think thoughts that could never be written down because I could never trust another human being again.

Therefore, I thought, what the Landowskis would get if any of them ever read this—and part of me was sure that they would try, just out of curiosity if nothing else—is a diary that began on the day that I had already said my last prayers.

In fact, maybe I had never said them; I had been so delirious with fever, starvation and exhaustion that perhaps I dreamt it—but anyway, it was the day that I had gazed into the most beautiful female face I had ever seen.

As I wrote an abridged, factual paragraph on how the beautiful lady had taken me in, whispered words of endearment and allowed me to sleep indoors for the first time in heaven knows how long, I thought about how sad she had looked the last time I'd seen her. I had since discovered her name was Izabela—Bel for short. She and Landowski's atelier assistant, Monsieur Brouilly (who'd asked me to call him Laurent, not that in my current state of dumbness I'd call him anything at all), had fallen madly in love. And that night, when she looked sad, she had come to say goodbye. Not just to me, but to him too.

Even though I was very young, I had actually read quite a lot about love. After Papa had left, I'd worked my way through his bookshelf and learnt some extraordinary things about the ways of grown-ups. At first, I had presumed that the physical act which was being described must make the story a comedy in some ways, but then when it had been repeated by authors I knew were definitely not humourists, I'd realised that it must be true. Now *that* was something I definitely wouldn't be writing about in my diary!

A small chuckle escaped my lips and I slapped my hands to my mouth. It felt so strange, because a chuckle was an expression of some level of happiness. The physical body's natural response.

‘Goodness!’ I whispered. It was odd to hear my own voice, which seemed deeper than the last time I’d uttered a word. No one would hear me up here in the attic; both the maids were downstairs scrubbing, polishing and working through the endless laundry that hung on the ropes tethered at the back of the house. Anyway, even if they couldn’t hear me up here, it was a habit I mustn’t get into, this happiness thing, because if I could chuckle, then it meant I had a voice and could definitely speak. I tried to think of things to make me sad, which really did feel very odd, given that the only way I seemed to—against all the odds—have made it to France was by disappearing into my imagination and thinking happy thoughts. I thought about the two maids, who I could always hear chattering through the thin wall that separated us at night. They complained that their pay was terrible, the hours too long, their mattresses lumpy and their attic bedroom freezing in winter. I wanted to hammer on the thin wall and shout that they should feel so lucky that there was a wall separating me and them, that the family did not all live together in a single room, that they *had* wages, however bad they were. And as for saying that their rooms were cold in winter...well, I had studied the climate of France, and even though Paris, which I’d discovered we were on the very edges of, was in the north, the thought of a couple of degrees below zero being a problem made me want to chuckle all over again.

I finished the first paragraph in my brand-new ‘official’ diary and read it back to myself, pretending that I was Monsieur Landowski who was reading it, with his funny little beard and big bushy moustache.

I live in Boulogne-Billancourt. I have been taken in by the kind Landowski family. Their names are Monsieur and Madame Paul and Amélie Landowski, and their children are Nadine (20), Jean-Max (17), Marvel (13) and Françoise (11). They are all very kind to me. They tell me I have been very ill and it will take time to get my strength back up. The maids are named Elsa and Antoinette, and the cook is Berthe. She is always offering me more and more of her beautiful patisserie, to fatten me up, she says. The first time she gave me a full plate, I ate every morsel on it and then I was violently sick five minutes later. When the doctor came to see me, he told Berthe that my stomach had shrunk through malnutrition and she must give me smaller plates of food, or I could get very sick again and die. I think this upset Berthe but I hope that now I am almost eating properly again, I am also appreciating her cooking. There’s a member of staff I have not yet met, but who the family talk about a lot. Her name is Madame Evelyn Gelsen, and she is the housekeeper. She is on holiday at the moment, visiting her son who lives in Lyon.

I am worried that I am costing this kind family money, what with all the food I now eat, plus the doctor having to come out and visit me. I know how expensive doctors can be. I have no money and no occupation and I can’t see a way of paying them back, which of course they will expect and is the right thing to do. I am not sure how long I will be allowed to stay here, but I try to enjoy every day in their beautiful home. I thank the Lord for their kindness and pray for them every night.

My teeth crunched down on the end of the pencil as I nodded with satisfaction. I had made the language simplistic, adding the odd basic spelling mistake just to make me look like I was a normal ten-year-old boy. It wouldn't do to let them know what kind of education I had once received. After Papa had left, I'd done my best to keep up my lessons as he'd urged me to do, but without him as my guide, things in that department had suffered rather.

Pulling out a beautiful sheet of clean white paper from the drawer in the old desk—and to me, having a drawer and a writing space all of my own was beyond any luxury I'd ever imagined—I began to write a letter.

*Landomski Atelier
Rue Moisson Desroches
Boulogne-Billancourt
7th August 1928*

*Dear Monsieur and Madame Landomski,
I wish to say thank you to you both for your gift. It is the most beautiful diary I've
ever owned and I will write in it every day, as you asked me.
Also, thank you for having me.*

I was just about to add the polite 'Yours' and my name before I stopped myself. I folded the paper neatly in two and then four, and wrote their names on the front of it. I would put it on the silver dish that held the post tomorrow.

Even if I had not reached the place I had set out for, I was near enough. Compared to the distance I'd already completed, it was the equivalent to a stroll along the Rue Moisson Desroches and back. But I did not want to leave yet. As the doctor had said to Berthe, I needed to build up my strength, not just in my body, but in my mind. Even if the doctor could not see into it, I could have told him that the worst thing wasn't the physical punishment I'd taken, but the fear that clawed inside me still. Both the maids, probably because they'd got bored of complaining about everyone else in the house, had told me that I cried out in the night, waking them up. On my long journey, I had become so used to it and so exhausted besides, that I'd been able to fall straight back to sleep, but here, being rested and warm in my own bed had made me soft. Often, I couldn't return to sleep after the nightmares had come. I wasn't even sure that 'nightmares' was the correct way to describe them. So often it was my cruel mind making me relive things that had really happened to me.

Standing up and walking over to my bed, diary in hand, I climbed under the sheet and the blanket I did not need because the weather at present was

stifling. I took the diary and rammed it down the inside of my pyjama bottoms, so it sat snugly against my inner thigh. Then I removed the leather pouch that hung from my neck and put it in the same place against my other thigh. If my long journey had taught me anything, it was where the safest hiding places were for such precious things.

I lay back on the mattress—another thing Elsa and Antoinette had complained about, yet to me it was like sleeping on a cloud of angels' wings—closed my eyes, said a quick prayer for Papa and my mama, wherever in heaven she might be, and tried to drift into sleep.

A thought was nagging at me as I did so. As much as I hated to admit it, there was another reason for me writing my thank you letter to the Landowskis: even though I knew I must continue my journey, I was not quite ready to give up the most wonderful feeling of all—safety.



‘So, what do you think of him, young man?’ Monsieur Landowski asked me as I looked into the eyes of our Lord, just one of which was almost as big as I was. He had just finished perfecting the head of what in Brazil they called the *Cristo Redentor*, and who I would call Jesus Christ. I had been told by Monsieur Laurent Brouilly that the statue would stand on top of a mountain in a city called Rio de Janeiro. It would be thirty metres tall by the time all the pieces had been put together. I had seen the miniature versions of the finished sculpture and knew that the Brazilian (and French) Christ would stand with his arms wide open, embracing the city beneath him. It was clever how, from a distance, you might just think it was a cross. How they would get the statue up the mountain and assemble it had been a matter of great discussion and worry over the past few weeks. Monsieur Landowski seemed to have many heads to worry about, because he was also working on the sculpture of a Chinese man called Sun Yat-sen, and was fretting over the eyes. He was a perfectionist, I thought.

During the long, hot summer days, I had been drawn to Monsieur Landowski’s atelier, creeping in and hiding behind the many boulders that sat on the floor, waiting to be shaped into a form. The workshop was usually busy with apprentices and assistants who, like Laurent, were there to learn from the great master. Most of them ignored me, although Mademoiselle Margarida always gave me a smile when she arrived in the morning. She was a great friend of Bel, so I knew she was one of the trustworthy ones.

Monsieur espied me in the atelier one day and, like any father, reproached me for not asking permission before I entered. I shook my head and put my arms out in front of me, backing away towards the door, then the kind monsieur relented and beckoned me towards him.

‘Brouilly here tells me you like to watch us at work. Is this true?’

I nodded.

‘Well then, there is no need to hide. As long as you swear never to touch anything, you are welcome here, boy. I only wish my own children showed as much interest as you in my profession.’

Since that moment, I had been allowed to sit at the trestle table with a piece of unwanted soapstone, and provided with my own set of tools.

‘Watch and learn, boy, watch and learn,’ Landowski had advised. And I had. Not that it made any difference to my own methods, banging the hammer onto the chisel upon my piece of rock. No matter how I tried to shape it into the simplest of forms, I always ended up with a pile of rubble in front of me.

‘So, boy, what do you think?’ asked Monsieur Landowski, gesturing to the head of the *Cristo*. I nodded vigorously, as always feeling guilty that this kind man who had taken me in still tried to elicit a vocal response from me. He deserved to receive one just due to his perseverance, but I knew that as soon as I opened my mouth to talk, I’d be in danger.

Madame Landowski, now knowing I could write and understand what was being said to me, had handed me a pile of scrap paper.

‘So, if I ask you a question, you can write the reply, yes?’

I’d nodded. From then on, communication had been very simple.

In answer to Monsieur Landowski’s question, I took my pencil from my shorts pocket, wrote one word that took up almost the entire page, and handed it to him.

He chuckled as he read it.

“‘Magnifique”, eh? Well, thank you, young sir, and let us only hope that your response is the one the *Cristo* will receive when he stands proudly atop Corcovado Mountain on the other side of the world. *If* we can ever get him there...’

‘Have faith, sir,’ countered Laurent from behind me. ‘Bel tells me that preparations for the use of the funicular railway are well underway.’

‘Does she indeed?’ Monsieur Landowski raised one of his bushy grey eyebrows. ‘You seem to know more than I do. Heitor da Silva Costa keeps telling me we will discuss how to ship my sculpture over and then erect it, but the conversation never seems to take place. Is it lunchtime yet? I need some wine to calm my nerves. I am beginning to feel that this *Cristo* project may be the end of my career. I was a fool for ever saying yes to such madness.’

‘I’ll fetch the meal,’ Laurent responded, and headed for the tiny kitchen, every detail of which I would always remember as being my first safe haven since I’d left home all those months ago. I smiled as I watched Laurent open a bottle of wine. As I often did when I was awake early, I’d crept down to the atelier at dawn just to be amongst the beauty it contained. I’d sit there and think about how Papa would have laughed that out of all the places I could have ended up, such as the Renault factory only a few kilometres from here, I’d arrived instead in a place that he himself would have called an artistic

temple. I just knew that it would please him somehow.

This morning, as I'd sat amongst the boulders and looked up into the *Cristo's* gentle face, I'd heard a noise from the room behind the curtain where we ate our food. Tiptoeing over to it and peering behind, I had seen a pair of feet sticking out from under the table. It transpired the sound was the gentle snoring of Laurent. Since Bel had gone back to Brazil, I'd noticed he often seemed the worse for drink in the morning, his eyes red and bleary, and his skin sallow and grey as if he might have to go and heave up the contents of his stomach at any moment. (And I had had *a lot* of experience in knowing when a man or a woman had sailed well past normal boundaries.)

As I watched him now pour a healthy glass for himself, I worried for his liver, which Papa had said was most affected by drink. But it wasn't just Laurent's liver I was concerned about; it was his heart too. Even though I understood that it was impossible for the organ itself to be physically broken by love, something inside the man *had*. Maybe one day I would understand the wish to drown away pain with alcohol.

'*Santé!*' the two men said as they clinked their glasses together. As they sat at the table, I made myself useful in the kitchen, collecting the bread, cheese and bulbous red tomatoes the lady down the road grew in her garden.

I knew this because I had watched Evelyn, the housekeeper, appear in the kitchen with a box laden with vegetables. As she was not a thin lady, and well into middle age, I'd run across the room to take the box from her and place it on the side.

'Goodness, today is a hot one,' she'd panted as she'd sat down heavily on one of the wooden chairs. I'd fetched her a glass of water before she'd even asked for it, and taking some paper and a pencil out of my pocket, I wrote down a question for her.

'Why don't I send the maids?' she read, then eyed me. 'Because, little boy, neither of those two would know a rotten peach from a perfect one. They're both city girls, with not a notion of fresh fruits and vegetables.'

Taking the paper back from her, I'd written another sentence.

Next time you go, I will come with you to carry the box.

'That is most kind of you, young man, and if this weather keeps up, I might just hold you to it.'

The weather did keep up and I did go and help her. On the way along the street, she chatted away about her son, telling me proudly he was at university studying to become an engineer.

'He'll make something of himself one day, you'll see,' she added as we'd picked our way through the vegetables displayed at the stall, me holding the box for those that passed her muster. Out of everyone in the Landowski household, Evelyn was my favourite person, even though I'd been dreading her return, having heard the maids' chatter through the walls about when 'the dragon' would be back. I'd been introduced to her as 'the boy with no name