

## **The Saltamontes Chronicles, Part 2:**

### **The Secret Brotherhood**

#### **Plot Overview**

Five years have passed since Annabelle's journey through Europe and the boys' escape from war, starvation, misery and the orphanage. Annabelle has sold her house in Orléans, and with the proceeds, along with the inheritance from her uncle, has bought a large estate in sunny Tuscany, near San Gimignano, where Alberto also lives with them. Both boys and little Amélie, who was found in Monaco, have been adopted by Alberto and Annabelle, and their now international family lives in a huge house on the estate, which after several years' hard work has been lovingly restored and is now the most imposing in the whole area. A feeling of stability and lasting family ties have been strengthened by Alberto's proposal to Annabelle, followed by their wedding and a beautiful reception, also attended by Irene and Heinrich Miller from Heidelberg. They have been joined by their closest friends, Madame Boulot and her partner Emmanuel Sol, who spend six months in a nearby vineyard with her faithful servants Fabien and Antoinette, whom she treats like family, and six months on the Côte d'Azur. The boys' favourite carer at the orphanage, Barbara, has become romantically involved with Daniel, and together they run a house and a small vineyard in nearby Iano, where Barbara has recently set up a school for the local children. Thirteen-year-old Adam remains a keen constructor of machines and devices, some of which are more successful than others, and is a thoughtful, kind boy, while nearly eighteen-year-old Alex has turned into an extremely handsome and charming young man who is highly popular with all the women and girls, and thanks to his father has improved his automotive interests and skills. Their adoptive mother, a French aristocrat, has taught both boys good manners and social graces, while also raising them in the spirit of free choice, openness, tolerance and understanding for others, and respect for effort, change and creative work. Amélie has grown into a girl who is increasingly aware of her feminine charms and reads books with a passion, has cultivated her musical talents by learning to play the piano and has only one worry – she can't understand why her older brothers won't let her in on their secrets, and in particular why she's always ignored by Alex, who she's in love with.

Alex, now approaching eighteen, is in a rebellious phase; desiring independence and adulthood, he is in a constant state of irritation and takes his frustrations out on everyone around him, especially his younger sister, who he generally ignores, but sometimes subjects to spiteful teasing. The main reason for his problems is his never-ending love for Catarina and his longing for a girl that not only can he not forget about, but also for whom he has feelings of guilt for having run off and left when he was thirteen. In the evenings and during sleepless nights he thinks of her, but his greatest desire is to marry her and become independent (almost immediately, of course!), which will allow him to make his own decisions and become rich on his own account. Then he'll be able to throw himself at Catarina's feet to prove his worth to her. By the age of seventeen, Alex already has his own success in life mapped out. Fortunately, however, Annabelle has always tried to talk openly with her children, learn about their problems and help solve them. As a result, Alex has confided to his mother on many occasions, telling her what bothers him and what he feels. At the wedding, he receives his mother's assurances that he'll be able to go to Parma to find Catarina. Alex also believes that the way to becoming rich is to get to the underground cities

of the Saltamontes Brotherhood and seize their treasures to offer them to Catarina, which he has confided to Adam, who has reminded him of his mother's words that happiness is a process. Nobody is quite sure how Alex imagines he will achieve all of this, but he feels like he's a knight in a fairy tale.

One month after the wedding, Alberto and Annabelle decide to go on honeymoon to Paris, and during their absence, Daniel and Barbara are to look after their home and children. Alex cleverly talks his father into borrowing his motorbike while they're away; this is the pinnacle of his youthful ambitions. At the same time, as the wedding guests extend their stay at their home, conversations return to a subject which until recently has been successfully avoided by the family, that is, a more in-depth discussion of the secrets held by the Saltamontes Brotherhood and their underground cities. Folding under pressure from the children, Annabelle and Alberto take the position that for safety reasons and due to their own near-fatal experience in the underground city in Cahors, they forbid both boys to go down there, and if they're interested in the Brotherhood itself it will only be under the watchful eye of Fabien, who's considered both prudent and knowledgeable in this regard. The children are grateful to their parents for their decision, especially Alex, but nevertheless they still debate where the end of their freedom lies and how and when it will be possible, without breaking the ban imposed by their parents, to at least work their way around it. After their parents leave, the boys take Alex's horse and visit Fabien and Antoinette every day, and a distraught Amélie follows Barbara around, complaining that they don't want to take her with them. Fabien has already given Alex and Adam an old, yellowing map of San Gimignano with a few mysterious points marked on it, and he has also told the boys that he has a tin, which he has yet to open, that he got from his friend Bastien, a second-hand bookseller from Toulouse. The tin was accidentally left in Bastien's shop by a rather odious-looking old man in the company of a handsome youth with dark curly hair. The boys jump at this because they've already met an old man with a companion who looked exactly like that in San Gimignano, and were treated very rudely by them, but in the process they came across the Brotherhood library. This piques Fabien's interest and, retracing the boys' footsteps, he accompanies them to the city to revisit the places they've discovered, and establish that this mysterious old man from San Gimignano is called Horace (Hostus Vitruvius). In the very early morning, so as not to arouse suspicion and to be able to spend more time visiting the rooms, they all go to the library, which is hidden behind a carved door, and discover another door leading deep into the building with side corridors branching off. There, they unexpectedly meet a woman dressed in white, with grey hair and clear, almost translucent eyes, and two children. The figure is curious to know what they're looking for in the underworld, but at the same time is kind to them, because she senses that they're good people, and to their surprise, she has some information for them. Alex cheekily says that he's interested in the Brotherhood's treasures, which the woman accepts with goodwill, but Fabien pours cold water on this by making it clear that they're primarily interested in learning about the Brotherhood. The woman says that Fabien's wife is currently in danger, and as far as the Brotherhood is concerned, it is people like them who can help it greatly in the present-day difficult situation, thereby obliging them to pay the underground city another visit. The woman's announcement turns out to be prophetic – Antoinette isn't at home, and an all-day search comes to naught. Then in San Gimignano, the woman from the underground library appears like a ghost before Fabien to give him a piece of paper with the address of Bastien and Antoinette in Parma and make them go urgently to Ronda in Spain, where Fabien and the

boys will undertake a mission to renew and save the Brotherhood. This forces Fabien to make immediate preparations for the trip and to make a phone call to Annabelle and Alberto to get permission for him to take Adam and Alex to Parma and then on to Ronda. They travel first to Parma, in Madame Boulot's car, with Alex, who's had a tantrum and threatened blackmail, proudly riding behind on Alberto's motorbike. Alex's uncompromising attitude is down to personal reasons – he's desperate to meet Catarina in Parma after these five years, during which time he's missed her, but he also wants to impress her with his 'grown-up-ness', and the best way to do this is by showing off his skills on Alberto's motorbike. Adam, meanwhile, travels cuddled up to Meatball in the car with Fabien just like in years gone by, having mature adult conversations and finding common ground despite the age barrier. In the suburbs of Parma, the travellers agree to meet up at a specific time and then split up so that each of them can attend to their own business unimpeded. Alex has trouble finding Sofia's house, because Parma has changed since the war. Overworked and overweight, but full of the wisdom gained in a simple life, Sofia, who as ever is surrounded by a gaggle of children, has been widowed in the intervening years, but at the sight of Alex is moved and happy to recognise in the grown-up, elegant young man the Alex she knew from five years ago. After an initial warm exchange of greetings and a brief catch-up, Alex begins to ask after Catarina, unable to hide the emotion in his voice. Sofia is a little confused and tells him that it isn't a good idea to go rushing in and surprise her, because during the five years that have been happy for Alex, Catarina has had a few painful experiences that have left a mark on her current mental state, but Alex has already stopped listening and rushes straight to Tiziano's old apartment where Catarina now lives. Here he meets a changed young woman, who's been neglected and is tearful and indifferent to him. Instead of an outpouring of joy, the dream encounter has brought disappointment and a sense of rejection that Alex can neither understand nor bear. He doesn't want to listen to Sofia, who despite Alex's objections takes him to an orphanage and shows him a baby boy, less than a year old, whom Catarina has had to give up, and forces him to read her diary. The noise of the motorbike engine drowns out Sofia's cry that Catarina really loves him.

Meanwhile, Fabien and Adam meet Bastien and Fabien's wife, Antoinette, who explains to her husband how she inexplicably came to be in Parma thanks to an unknown device. Bastien briefly tells them of the Brotherhood's desperate situation, explaining all the secret precautions taken so as not to reveal their whereabouts. The problem has been that the association, which was founded to spread the achievements of technology and science for the good of man and to protect good people from war, and also from the vain pride and stupidity of rulers who sacrifice the lives of many for their own personal gains, has been exposed to the destruction of Horace's spies, who unfortunately have already penetrated the underground city, and in order to seize its treasures have lied to and intimidated the members of the Brotherhood living there. Bastien also tells Fabien that the frightening characters with evil intentions that he encountered in Cahors are Hostius's people, and only those in Ronda are still holding out against them, but they still need the map of San Gimignano with its marked entrances and magic stone to claim total victory. Fortunately, these things are in Bastien's possession, hidden in a small suitcase. Therefore, they head straight for Ronda and get to the members of the Brotherhood hiding there underground in order to warn them and reveal the truth as well as give them support and spiritual leadership which will help them save the valuable ideals of the Brotherhood. As everyone hurriedly prepares for the trip to Ronda, Alex suddenly arrives. He announces that he will not go with

them, and he deflects all questions with a grunt. Confused and lonely, Alex is sitting bored in Bastien's apartment when he discovers the priceless contents of the small suitcase, which through absent-mindedness hasn't been taken to Ronda, and begins carrying the magical stone in his pocket, learning about its properties with amazement and fear. To pass the time he goes to a bar, where suddenly he finds he can read the minds of the people around him, and when danger is imminent, the stone burns him. He becomes convinced of its properties when by chance he meets the beautiful Carla, an art student who is fascinated by him, and who is keen to impress him with the local influence of her all-powerful father. Accustomed to getting everything she wants and infatuated with Alex, she starts trying to seduce the handsome young man, promising him the world by way of her connections. Fortunately, Alex is able to keep a healthy distance and not give in to her, although it sometimes proves very difficult. With the stone, Alex experiences a state bordering reality and sleep, during which it appears to him that he's in an underground city where he knows the contents of all the books kept there, he is creator of the world, he meets a wise and noble old man who leads the underground city in Ronda, who assures him that they'll get to know each other soon, and finally is the captain of a sinking pirate ship, because the stone is able to go back to the past, and trigger a sixth sense and the ability to predict the future. The stone's power also enables contact with the dead, meaning that Alex is able to meet his biological mother, who gives him some advice for situations that are difficult for boys (love is what's most important) and constantly watches over him and Annabelle, who adopted him, from the afterlife. After this meeting, Alex goes back to see Catarina and takes her on a beautiful and romantic trip to the seaside, where they both find each other again, rekindling lost feelings and making long-term plans for the future of Catarina's son, now in an orphanage, whom she'd rescued in Rome from a bag on a rubbish tip and hid the fact that he wasn't her own child because she was afraid of losing him, and in doing so, exposed herself to public scorn and condemnation. Alex is the first person she has spoken to about this. During their visit to the seaside, the magic stone ceases to emit its supernatural heat. Unfortunately, on the last day of their stay they experience an unpleasant and dangerous situation. As luck would have it, Carla turns up with her father. They spot Alex with Catarina and they both fall into a rage. First, Carla makes a scene in front of Catarina, and before leaving the hotel, Carla's father, Hostus Vitruvius (Horace), as it turns out, demands that Alex leave Catarina, marry Carla and give up the stone. Of course, Alex objects to all of these conditions, and ends up being beaten up and getting his magic stone stolen. Alex returns to the room nursing a split lip and tells Catarina the whole story of the search for the Brotherhood in San Gimignano and the history of the stone up to meeting Carla. Alex supposes that Horace must be going to Ronda with the stone, and so they take the risky decision to go there together on the motorbike.

Fabien and the other travellers arrive in Ronda without incident. Unfortunately, they find no trail leading them to the underworld, and aren't helped when Bastien realises that the suitcase with the map and the stone has been left in Parma. They go to the local antiquarian in the hope of getting help, but he aggressively throws them out of his shop. This forces them to stay at a hotel. The following day they're supposed to meet Annabelle and Alberto, who are returning home from their honeymoon, but in the evening Adam points out that they are being watched closely by an individual in a black cape. The next day, after Adam has welcomed his parents, everyone decides to risk another meeting with the same antiquarian who, this time, receives them very warmly and lets them into the underworld, because he has been told about their rescue mission. There they meet the real Horace, who presents

them with a number of books. Adam is given the honour of creating an entry in the book, an honour bestowed only on a select few. Horace has already read them all the interesting and informative story, also related to the Brotherhood, of the pirate schooner *Wydah*, whose captain couldn't marry his beloved Mary due to poverty, and thus began his life on the high seas to get treasure for her. He became captain of a pirate ship, but was no ordinary pirate: he robbed the rich to give to the poor. His ship carried no slaves, and if he encountered any on other ships he would release them. He shared the gold equally amongst his crew, regardless of their job. This went on until the ship broke up off the coast of America in 1717, but the five surviving sailors were rescued and hidden by a local pastor who was a Guardian of the Brotherhood, and part of the ship's treasure was saved from looters and taken to Italy and Spain and hidden in the underground cities. It turns out that that the magic stone has come from this pirate ship. After reading the story, Horace leads the whole company down into more underground rooms, but he admits that many of the doors to them have been locked for several years. The first is opened by Alberto, who has previously shown his skills as a lock-picker. To Horace's surprise, the next corridor shows signs of someone's presence. As they head into more rooms, Albert unexpectedly smells a familiar perfume, whereupon Béatrice appears, and arrogantly begins shouting that *she* will now be ruler of the underground city, which she intends to open to visitors. Suddenly the fake Horace comes up behind her and imprisons them all, including Béatrice, in the vaults, behind steel doors. It was a trap. The real Horace asks Adam to use his special intuitive powers, which he does, and sees that in the adjoining underworld there are weak people who have been imprisoned, put to work and exploited by the fake Horace. The real Horace and the men began to slide open a hatch in the ground, whereupon they all find themselves in a room with the fake Horace's people. Despite warnings, these people, as if hypnotised, begin to tie them up, but Alberto and Adam start fighting them and defeat them because they're physically weak. A struggle then takes place, whose outcome wouldn't be certain if not for Alex's arrival with the magic stone, which he uses to cause a storm that defeats the fake Horace. Everyone, including the people who have been imprisoned and cheated, begin to escape, with Adam showing the way, and they all manage to reach the surface. Annabelle is already there with Catarina, helping the weak and exhausted. Horace is able to make plans to rebuild the underground city and give a few months' convalescence to the most vulnerable victims, who have been trapped underground, chained and forced into hard labour by the false leaders. Once again, friendship, love and selflessness have won. Annabelle and Alberto's family and their friends return safe and sound to sunny Tuscany.