

The
Cabinet of
CURIOSITIES



by
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Chapter One

The train shook a little, and Rosa Dew awoke to find her right foot tangled up in a carrier bag. Bending down to free herself, she cast a subtle look around to see if she was alone. Had she spoken or even cried out in her sleep? Fortunately, the carriage was empty, except for the conductor slowly making his way towards her, occasionally reaching out to a tattered headrest for support as the train lurched and rattled complainingly.

Rosa sat very still, staring straight out of the window as though trying to turn herself invisible. There was very little to see: just fields, growing darker as afternoon turned into evening. She clearly hadn't become invisible anyway, because the conductor nodded at her, and sat down in the seat opposite.

'No ticket, I suppose?'

Rosa shook her head. The conductor scratched a long nose with a long finger, and heaved a long sigh. Rosa couldn't help noticing the odd colour of the lank hair sticking out from under his cap: it was mostly grey, but with an almost greenish tinge. He clapped his hands together suddenly, making her jump in her seat.

'You'll be wanting to murder me then,' said the conductor. He looked almost pleased at the idea, rubbing his long hands together thoughtfully. 'That's your plan. Murder me, and take my ticket machine, and my money, and go on a spending spree. To Margate.'

Rosa didn't even know where Margate was. 'No, I didn't really plan to get on the train. I'm just sort of... here.'

‘Ah,’ said the conductor wisely. ‘Drugs.’

‘No!’ said Rosa. ‘Not drugs. Look, I’ll get off at the next station. You don’t need to call the police or anything. Honestly, I’m really sorry.’

The conductor looked at her for a long while, as though somehow... weighing her. Rosa looked straight back. His eyes were bright green.

Maybe she was a little over-dressed for a train journey. Was that why he was staring, Rosa wondered? She was wearing purple suede boots, a green flared skirt with little mirrors running around it in a complicated pattern, a pink shirt covered by a black jumper that was more holes than jumper, the entire ensemble wrapped in an ankle-length cream coat with thick fake-fur cuffs and collar, and topped off with a wide-brimmed green hat, a white feather sticking jauntily out of the band. Peeking out of her strawberry-patterned handbag was an oversized pair of silver sunglasses with rims shaped like stars. She was glad she hadn’t put those on. It might have looked a bit much.

The train was slowing now as it came into the next station.

‘Anyone worrying about you at home?’ the conductor asked, suddenly.

Rosa tried think of a single person who might be missing her, and couldn’t. Which was odd, but then she’d only just woken up. Her memory was bound to be a little bit fuzzy.

‘I don’t think so,’ she said. ‘I haven’t run away, if that’s what you mean. And I don’t have any money, but if you give me your address, I’ll send you the price of the ticket as soon as I can.’

Then, through the half-open carriage window she smelled something she had never smelled before, but recognised straight away: the sea. Somehow she knew this was where she had to get off.

The train stopped, and the conductor looked at her for a second longer, then swung out the carriage door and stood back.

‘Go on,’ he said, his face turning miserable again. ‘Out you get. Probably lose my job over this. Have to tell them you turned nasty, and overpowered me.’

Rosa picked up her bag and climbed down onto the platform. The conductor swung the door shut, and bent his tall frame down to look sadly out of the window after her.

‘I hope you don’t lose your job,’ she said. The conductor shrugged, and the train started to slowly pull away.

Rosa walked along the station platform. The small ticket office was closed. A sign swung slowly, creaking in the breeze.

‘Wilmington,’ she read to herself, and then turned, hearing a shout. The train was picking up speed now, but the conductor was waving a small crumpled piece of paper at her out of the window. Breaking into a run, Rosa was just able to catch up enough for him to thrust a five-pound note in her hand before she ran out of platform.

‘I’ll tell them you had a gun,’ he yelled. And then he called out something else, but the engine was too noisy now. Rosa stopped, and waved at the conductor, and he waved back, once. The train went over a level crossing, disappearing into the darkness, and suddenly all she could think about was how tired, and cold, and hungry she was.



Chapter Two

According to the large map on the wall, Walmington station was part way up a hill, on the very edge of the town itself. If Rosa continued uphill and on to the main road, she would have to walk for another six miles before reaching the next town. So she went downhill, towards Walmington. There might at least be somewhere open to buy food.

It took Rosa a little over five minutes before she was in the high street. In that time she was passed by only one car. It was long, silver-grey and sleek, and although it looked old in design, the engine purred and whispered as though it were brand new. Luggage was bundled up at the rear, and the windows were blacked out. As the car slid by, Rosa thought of underwater creatures like sharks, and large, hungry eels, and she shivered.

As she walked through Walmington, Rosa passed newsagents and record shops and clothes stores but they were all closed.

One pub was open, next to the war memorial. Its door was slightly ajar, and she could just make out a sliver of warm orange light, and quiet conversation, and the low insistent beeping of a fruit machine. But she knew she was too young to go in, and from somewhere further in town a sharp greasy smell was making her mouth water, so she kept going, putting one foot in front of the other.

And there, right through town and on the sea front it was, a solitary fish and chip shop, still open. Rosa headed towards its welcoming lights, only

noticing at the last minute that the entrance was blocked by a thin-faced boy in a tracksuit, swigging from a can of drink. There was a woman behind the counter, staring at a badly flickering television, on which a quiz show contestant was trying to answer a particularly difficult question.

‘Excuse me,’ said Rosa, politely. The youth ignored her. He had pale skin, marked with the craters of old spots, and the red pocks of a fresh crop. Rosa tried again.

‘Excuse-’

Without looking at her, he spat out a long stream of brown liquid that fizzed and splattered on the tiled floor. It missed the toes of her boots, but only just.

Rosa stood in frozen silence for a second.

What did I say? she thought, utterly bewildered. But the moment was broken by the tinny sound of applause from the television, and the boy pushed past her and sauntered out the shop. Rosa stared after him. The woman shouted something, but the boy had already gone, so she turned her glare on Rosa instead.

‘E’s barred,’ she said, arms crossed. ‘And don’t tell me you want as many chips as you can get for fifteen pence, or seventeen, or twenty-two, or you’re barred an’all.’

After showing the woman her note, and receiving a grunt of acknowledgement in return, Rosa bought a pasty.

‘Watch them seagulls,’ the woman advised. ‘They’s buggers for pasties. A kind of tree.’

Rosa found this last sentence particularly enigmatic, and it wasn’t until she was sitting huddled in a seafront bus shelter that she realised the woman had been talking to the television.

The pasty was large, and surprisingly hot, so Rosa just ate half, wrapping the rest for later and letting it glow warmly in her lap as she watched the sun set over the water. Tiny waves slapped against the pebbly beach before being sucked back again, almost apologetically.

‘Nice view, innit.’

The shell-suited boy from the chip shop was standing next to her. She hadn’t heard him walk up to her. Or the two other boys, dressed identically, standing behind him.

‘Very nice.’ Rosa stood, instinctively knowing not to let herself get surrounded.

‘*Very nithe.*’ One of the other boys was slightly taller, and it was he who was mocking Rosa, talking in a silly, high-pitched lisp, which didn’t sound even vaguely like her. Rosa started to walk away, heading back into town, but they moved quickly into a line, blocking her way.

‘We want to borrow some money,’ said the first boy, and again, he was staring just past her. Rosa wondered for a moment if he was short-sighted, and then she realised: this is something he has learnt; a way to intimidate people by telling them you weren’t even worth looking at.

‘Yeah,’ said the taller boy. ‘We want some ginger beer, innit?’ The shorter boy, who hadn’t spoken yet, laughed, an uncontrolled, slightly hysterical sound.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘*Lashings* of it.’ They were all sniggering now, but watching her carefully.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Rosa and tried to walk past them. They stopped laughing instantly, and the first boy shot out a hand, grabbing her arm.

This is bad, she thought, but her fear gave her a burst of confidence and she kicked him in the shin, very hard, then ran, not looking back even as she heard him hit the ground, squealing in pain.



Chapter Three

Shouts and swearing told Rosa the youths were seconds behind her.

An alley entrance was just visible in the darkness so she darted into it, and took a left, then a right, trying to avoid circling round and running back into her pursuers. The footsteps behind her slowed, then stopped, the boys clearly confused by the twists and turns.

Rosa was lightly built, and though her boots weren't designed for running, they at least had fairly sensible heels. She started walking again, quickly and quietly, looking in vain for some side exit. There wasn't one, and worse, Rosa was starting to feel as though she were being in some way *channelled*. She breathed heavily now, and her legs grew a little shaky. Around her were high walls, topped with vicious shards of broken glass, and iron gates too, which presumably led into people's back gardens, but none would open, even when she kicked them in frustration.

Rosa's stomach rumbled and she remembered the wrapped pasty in her hand; a little squashed, but still warm.

Ducking behind a battered old red van, she greedily tore into it, not caring that a little paper came with it. It was tasty, she thought, but a little salty, and she was already thirsty from all the running. Perhaps somewhere a corner shop would be open. She probably had just enough money for a bottle of water.

As she looked up, she saw the first boy, the one she had kicked in the shin, standing in front of her, grinning triumphantly.

He was leaning a little awkwardly on his bad leg, and looking directly at her now. His eyes were a brilliant blue, Rosa noticed. He actually had quite nice eyes, which somehow made things worse.

Even thinking about it later, Rosa had no idea why she threw the pasty at him. It wouldn't have hurt him, and it certainly wouldn't have distracted him for the time she needed to start running again. Maybe she just wanted to wipe that grin off his face for a second. For whatever reason, she threw it as hard as she could.

It never hit him, although there was nothing wrong with her aim. Instead there was a feathered blur from above her and something small and winged snatched the food out of the air, barely a foot from the boy's face.

The boy staggered back in shock. What stayed in Rosa's mind wasn't the look of surprise on his face, or the expressions of thuggish pleasure on the faces of the other boys turning to shock as they rounded the corner, but that her improvised weapon hadn't been snatched out of the air by a claw, or a beak, but by a *prehensile foot*.

The thing hovered in the air for a second, and though it was dark now, Rosa could see that it wasn't a bird. It had the wrong shape entirely. The foot passed the morsel up to a pair of disturbingly human-like hands, and a face turned itself to Rosa baring sharp teeth in what might have been a threat, or a warning, or even a triumphant smirk.

A monkey? wondered Rosa. By the time she had even thought that monkeys don't have wings, the thing, whatever it was, had already flapped its wings and gone.

While the boys were still staring, open-mouthed, Rosa seized her chance and ran. She hoped that there would be an unbolted door somewhere, or a space to hide, but instead there was just another alley, with a high brick wall on one

side and the green-stained glass panes of an ancient conservatory on the other, with not a door in sight.

But she had either taken the corner too fast, or her boots finally betrayed her, for she skidded, and stumbled, tottering clumsily for a moment, before her hand encountered one of the lower panes of glass, which shifted suddenly under her weight.

Looking down, she saw that she had pushed the glass cleanly out of its frame, leaving a gap just big enough to fit through. Converting her stumble into a dive, she shot through the gap and over the glass, landing on her front in something soft, and damp. There was just enough time for her to swiftly fit the pane back into place a second before the boys entered the alley. Their voices were cut off instantly, though she could still see their smeared shapes through the dirty glass.



Chapter Four

Rosa watched the boys looking around themselves stupidly. Then they must have decided that she had climbed the high wall, as, after threatening gestures from their leader, they clambered on to a wheelie bin and one by one disappeared over it. She peered out of the glass for a long time, trying not to steam it up with her heavy ragged breaths, but eventually the sound of their shouting died away altogether, and the boys were gone.

Rosa had landed in what she thought might be a flower bed, although there was more moss and weeds than actual flowers.

Eurgh, she thought, and getting to her feet, began brushing herself down.

Her coat had a large green stain from her dive, and the rest of her clothes were looking distinctly the worse for wear. Her jumper was almost completely shredded.

How do you mend something that was mostly holes to begin with? Rosa wondered. In the end, she just pulled at the wool, winding it around her hand and putting the ball in her coat pocket. There. *How To Take Off A Jumper Without First Taking Off Your Coat*, by Rosa Dew.

A light came on with a 'plink'. Rosa froze. But it was only a small old-fashioned lamppost, planted haphazardly in a patch of bare earth.

Now there was light, Rosa could see that the conservatory was larger than it looked from the outside. Much larger. There were overgrown shrubs here, and small trees, and broad steps too, leading down into a large sunken area, the glass

roof high above her head now. The further in Rosa went, idly touching leaves that seemed to reach out to her as she passed, the more it seemed like a small wood, hidden away under glass. From ahead, she heard the tinkling of water. A dragonfly hung in the air in front of her for a second, eyes glowing like jewels, then shimmered and was gone.

Odd, thought Rosa idly, that somewhere as dull and nondescript as Walmington has a place like this hidden away.

Nothing here was very well maintained. Spades and forks lay on their sides, ivy beginning to creep over them. Statues and large urns were shrouded with creepers, one large round object on a plinth so covered in green leaves it was impossible to make out at all. Rosa pulled away a great branch of ivy and uncovered an enormous skull, fully three feet high. She read a wooden sign on the plinth. 'Giant (Self-' but the rest had rotted away. Rosa reached out and touched the skull's forehead. It was slightly rough, and when she tapped it with a nail, it rang hollow. There was a bird's nest in one of the eye sockets, though the birds themselves had left long ago. The skull was grinning.

Not an unfriendly grin though, thought Rosa. It almost looked rather nice. She let the ivy fall back to cover it once again.

The sound of running water was louder now, as Rosa travelled deeper into the garden, following a path of broken, mossy paving stones that led her eventually to a large fountain, which bubbled happily to itself. The water was clear, and she drank thirstily from her cupped hands. At first, her teeth ached a little at the cold, though soon a warm glow spread through her. She splashed a little more on her face and looked around.

The glass panels ran out against a brick wall here, and Rosa thought she had finally found the house the conservatory was set against. Spotting a large wooden door, she quietly tried twisting the handle, but it was locked. No way out through here.

Flakes of snow were starting to settle on the glass roof. *That's that, then*, she decided. No point heading out into the cold dark night with no food, and no idea where she was even going. Stay here tonight, then sneak back out in the morning.

She wouldn't even have to sleep on the floor. A bench sat just out of sight from the door and a little back from the path. No-one walking past the conservatory would ever see her.

Carved into the bench's back were the words 'Donated by the Stanton family'. Rosa ran her fingers over the carving, then lay down, tucking her bag under her head as a pillow and pulling her coat more tightly around her. *Whoever the Stanton family were, thought Rosa, they made surprisingly comfortable benches.*



Chapter Five

‘I told you there was something out here,’ said a woman’s voice. Deep, and a little rough sounding, but female nonetheless.

Rosa awoke, but had the presence of mind to keep her eyes shut, and her breathing steady.

‘You did.’ A man’s voice this time, clear and crisp.

‘A nose knows,’ said the woman, sounding a little smug.

While they were talking, Rosa had moved her right foot very slowly off the bench and on to the ground. Twining her fingers around the strap of her bag, she suddenly sprang to her feet, ran straight into the biggest, blackest dog she had ever seen in her life, and fell sprawling to the floor.

‘Works better if you open your eyes *before* you start running,’ said the man mildly, squatting on his heels before Rosa. He was a little older than his voice had suggested, but not quite old enough to be properly elderly. He wore patched jeans, an enormous baggy cardigan, and, Rosa trying not to stare too hard at this point, an eyepatch over his left eye, barely covering a terrible scar that ran up into a thinning silver hairline.

Rosa looked for the woman, but could see no-one else around. Just the enormous black dog, sitting about three feet away and watching her calmly, panting a little. For all the impression Rosa had made on it, she may as well have run straight into the wall.

The man squatted on his heels and looked at Rosa dispassionately. 'I'm the Professor,' he said.

'Rosa,' said Rosa. 'Rosa Dew.' She struggled to her feet, aware of the dog shifting its weight slightly as it followed her movements. 'I know I'm trespassing. I'm sorry. I'll leave now, if I may.'

In her fall, she had put her right hand straight into a patch of gravel. It was starting to throb now, and she clutched it tight in her other hand to try and stop the pain.

'Well, you're far too polite to be a burglar,' said the Professor, 'And that hand needs cleaning up. So you can climb back out of the conservatory, or clean that hand up, and leave through my front door, which seems rather more dignified, but it's up to you.'

Rosa thought for a moment. The Professor seemed trustworthy, and had kept his distance, even when he thought she was asleep. And she probably did need to clean herself up a bit.

'I'll use the front door,' she said, and took a step forwards, then froze as the dog made a soft low growl.

'It's all right,' he said, 'that's for my benefit, not yours.' Reaching out a hand, he ruffled the thick fur around the dog's ears. 'T'Maugh's very protective. I don't think she's ever been quite convinced I can take care of myself.'

The dog stopped growling, though its dark eyes remained fixed on Rosa's. The Professor led them back through the garden to the door Rosa had seen the night before, though it was open this time. Just before they entered the dark, wood-panelled corridor ahead of them, something occurred to her.

'Where's the woman?' she asked. 'The one I heard talking before.'

'Excellent question,' said the Professor. Rosa waited for him to continue, but he just smiled at her and kept walking. She wondered if he was mocking her, or if this was some kind of trick, and stopped for a second, frowning. Then she

felt the dog's nose pushing her, between her shoulder blades, its breath warm against the back of her neck, and she had to half-jog to catch up again.

They soon came to a small angular kitchen. The Professor jerked a thumb down a corridor towards a heavy wooden door.

'The official exit,' he said. 'Once I've sorted out your war wound.' He pulled a tattered old stool up to the sink. 'You'd better get that under the tap.'

Rosa sat on the stool and stared around the room as the cold water gushed over her hand.

The kitchen was stocked from floor to ceiling with glass jars, no two the same size, and each one crammed with dried herbs, powders and odder things, some of which Rosa was sure didn't belong in a kitchen.

Were those nasty-looking spiky things dried scorpions, she wondered. Who ate scorpions?

The largest jar of all sat on the middle of the kitchen table in a mass of torn brown paper, having clearly just been unwrapped. It was fully a third as tall as Rosa herself, and held three long, lumpy, black and white striped vegetables. They floated sadly, like depressed marrows.

'They're a kind of cucumber,' explained the Professor. 'Although they taste rather revolting.'

Rosa frowned.

'I get sent things in the post occasionally, you see,' the Professor continued. 'I collect this sort of thing. Or they get drawn here, I forget where one ends and the other begins. Rather irresponsible though, if this jar had smashed... well it doesn't bear thinking about.' He peered at the address label on the paper. 'I do wish senders would include their details,' he said, 'Still, a rare find. A rare find indeed!'

The Professor smiled at Rosa as if she was expected to have a clue what he was talking about.

‘Right,’ she said, carefully. ‘Well, my hand’s clean.’

To distract herself, while the Professor started picking out tiny pieces of gravel with the smallest pair of tweezers she had ever seen, Rosa looked over at the enormous dog. It was lying down in the corner of the room, still watching her, though its expression seemed to have shifted from aggressive caution to a simple doggy mournfulness.

‘What did you say her name was?’ asked Rosa.

‘T’Maugh,’ he replied, not looking up from her hand.

‘Tamore?’

‘T’*Maugh*. Emphasis on the second syllable. It’s a very old name – there’s always been a T’Maugh the Dog, although she’s the last, as far as we know.’

‘Oh,’ said Rosa, and winced as he extracted a particularly sharp bit of stone.

‘Sorry.’

‘It really didn’t hurt that much,’ Rosa lied, then said ‘Has she always been able to speak?’

The Professor froze. ‘HMMMM?’ he said, although he said it just a fraction too late. T’Maugh hadn’t changed her expression a bit. There was a sudden stinging sensation in her palm, and Rosa gasped.

‘Bit of glass,’ said the Professor, and held out a plaster. ‘You’d better put this on. A talking dog you say?’

Rosa put the plaster on, and looked the Professor straight in the eyes.

‘There was a woman talking when you found me this morning,’ she said, more calmly than she felt. ‘And thinking about it, she sounded sort of snuffly, and, well... doggy.’

The Professor shook his head and laughed.

‘Drugs?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Rosa, through gritted teeth. ‘Not drugs.’

‘Well, it seems like a very odd conclusion to draw,’ said the Professor briskly, ‘but I applaud your imagination, so rare in young people these days, and now I really must show you the door..’

‘I suppose it would have been an odd conclusion to draw,’ said Rosa, folding her arms, ‘if I hadn’t spent the night in a conservatory bigger on the inside than it is on the outside, after I’d just had my only meal stolen by a flying monkey.’

The Professor stared at her. From the floor, T’Maugh gave an enormous yawn, sneezed a couple of times, then fixed Rosa with a baleful gaze.

‘That Gary,’ said the dog. ‘Bloody monkey’s more trouble than it’s worth.’

‘I won’t tell anyone about Gary or T’Maugh, you know,’ said Rosa suddenly. The Professor had made a large pot of dark, smoky-smelling tea. ‘I just... thought it was worth mentioning.’

The big dog snorted, but it wasn’t entirely an unfriendly noise.

‘Well,’ said Rosa. ‘My hand’s much better now. And thanks again for the tea, but I suppose I’d better get going.’

‘Ah,’ said the Professor politely, ‘Of course.’ And then he paused for a moment.

‘Where to?’ he asked.



Chapter Six

Rosa was silent for a moment. T'Maugh worked herself carefully out from under the table and sat down at Rosa's feet, dark eyes looking up at her, sadly. Rosa stroked the dog's head.

Where *was* she going to go? She didn't know anyone, anywhere, *anything* really, other than her name. She tried to tell the Professor something, anything, but not a sound came out of her mouth.

The Professor frowned. 'Are you all right?' he asked. 'Are you ill?'

Rosa swallowed hard. 'I don't really know,' she said. Then she told the Professor and T'Maugh everything that had happened to her since she had woken up on the train.

'Amnesia,' said the Professor, when she had finished. 'No memory. Of where you came from, or where you were going.'

Rosa shook her head. 'Nothing. It's just gone, like-'

'Magic,' said T'Maugh. 'Or white plume moths – they can whip away a memory fast as lightning. Pointless asking if you remember seeing any, of course.'

Rosa stared at her. Magic? Magic *moths*?

The Professor shrugged. 'A blow to the head can have the same effect. Either way, I'll call the authorities. I'm sure we can get this all straightened out. We'll have your memory back in two shakes, you'll see.'

A telephone hung on the wall in the corner of the kitchen. The Professor dialled, and waited a few seconds, then smiled reassuringly at Rosa. ‘Missing Persons please,’ he said. ‘Oh good. Yes, I’ve got a young lady here, and she needs to talk to a police officer, if possible- marvellous. Probably best if she explains it to herself then. I’ll put her straight on.’

He handed Rosa the phone.

‘You have information about a missing person?’ said a voice. It was a man’s voice, and sounded exactly like you’d want a police officer to sound like: solid, maybe a bit heavy-footed, but reliable. Rosa felt better already.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It’s me. I woke up on a train, and... I don’t know where I’m from. Or anything. I’ve got amnesia, you see, and... I know it sounds stupid.’

‘Doesn’t sound stupid at all, miss’ said the police officer soothingly. ‘No reports of any missing young ladies locally, but don’t you worry miss, we’ll soon have this all straightened out.’

‘Oh good,’ said Rosa.

‘Now,’ said the voice, ‘Do you remember your name?’

‘Yes,’ said Rosa confidently. ‘It’s Rosa. Rosa Dew.’

There was a long silence.

‘Hello?’ said Rosa.

Eventually the policeman spoke again, but this time there was an edge to his voice.

‘Think it’s funny, wasting police time, do you?’ he said. He sounded annoyed.

Rosa blinked. ‘I don’t understand,’ she said. ‘That’s my name, “Rosa Dew”’

‘Of course it is,’ said the policeman. ‘Do you know what mine is?’

‘Er...’ said Rosa. ‘I’m afraid not.’

‘It’s “Mickey Mouse”’ he said.

There was a click, and then nothing.

Rosa stared at the phone, then at the Professor.

‘He hung up,’ she said. The Professor frowned, took the phone from her and redialled.

‘Someone having a bad day,’ he said, a little doubtfully, then spoke into the phone.

‘Missing persons,’ he said. ‘Yes, I’ve got a young lady here, name of Rosa Dew. I-’

He stared at the phone.

‘They hung up,’ Rosa guessed.

Quietly, he replaced the handset on the phone and nodded. ‘How odd.’

‘It’s my real name,’ said Rosa. ‘I’m sure it is. It’s the only thing I *am* sure of.’

‘Hmm,’ said the Professor. ‘Well, so much for the authorities. You really have no memories at all? Parents? Maybe the names of any friends? A school perhaps?’

Rosa shook her head.

‘Well we’re back to the ‘blow on the head’ theory,’ said the Professor. ‘Any soreness? Noticed any bruises lately?’

She shook her head again. ‘I haven’t even seen my reflection since...’ Her voice trailed away.



Chapter Seven

The house had a hall full of mirrors, though for some reason, the Professor thought it best for Rosa not to see her face for the first time in any of them. They were mostly covered with sheets anyway. Instead, T'Maugh led Rosa to the bathroom, while the Professor went off to wash up the tea things.

'Do you want me come in with you?' asked the dog.

'I think I'd rather you waited outside, if you don't mind,' said Rosa. She wasn't sure what she was going to see, and if there was someone around, she would have to be brave about it. And Rosa wasn't sure she had that much bravery left.

She took a shower first, watching the dirty water running past her feet getting gradually cleaner. Long hair brushed against her face as she dried herself, but she put a hand up and pulled it back, before wrapping herself in a large towelling bathrobe.

Now. Probably best to get the whole thing over in one go. Still Rosa took a few deep breaths before pulling up the stool and wiping the steam off the bathroom mirror.

Her hair was so black as to have a slight blue tinge, and very long, reaching down her back, slightly past her elbows. Her skin was pale, and her face a little rounder than she would have liked. Her eyes, she was disappointed to note, were a rather normal-looking dark brown. However, peering deeper she

noticed tiny flecks of green, and cheered up a little. Nose was quite small, ears... just ears. Rosa looked carefully for signs of bruising around the temples, or a telltale scar that would indicate... what? An operation? A blow to the back of the head? But there was nothing.

So, a normal face then. Pretty-ish, but not beautiful, though there was room for a lot of changes yet. Rosa realised with surprising calmness that she didn't even know how old she was. Twelve? Thirteen maybe? She hoped her nose would grow a little. Perhaps even some discernible cheekbones at some point. *Still*, thought Rosa, *I suppose I should be grateful for clear skin and no obvious deformities.*

Rosa stepped down from the stool and unbolted the door. T'Maugh looked up.

'I know what I look like now,' said Rosa confidently. 'And I think I'm probably about fifteen.'

T'Maugh grunted. 'You're thirteen if you're a day,' she said. 'Which you might be.'

Rosa suddenly noticed something. 'Where are my clothes?'

'In the nearest charity shop, if I'd had my way,' said T'Maugh, 'But I thought you'd probably want them washed – unless you're planning on sleeping on more benches and then rolling around in gravel again.'

'Not *specifically*,' said Rosa, puzzled.

T'Maugh nosed a bag of clothing forward into the steamy bathroom. 'Nieces from the right side of the family,' she said. 'They usually manage to leave something behind. Not sure you'll like them though. None of the Professor's family tends to dress like an heiress at a jumble sale.'

'Never mind,' said Rosa loftily, 'I'm sure I shall manage.'

T'Maugh looked at her, and frowned. 'Come back to the kitchen when you're done,' she said. 'We need to talk.'

Rosa barely made it into the kitchen before a small leathery hand pushed her rudely to one side and unscrewed the lid of the scorpion jar. Gary apparently liked eating three scorpions at once, and made sure to keep his mouth open so Rosa could hear just how much he was enjoying them.

‘Rude,’ she said firmly, frowning at him. The Professor had made another pot of tea, and put out a large spread of buttered toast. After Rosa had taken her third slice, the plate’s pattern had begun to emerge. It was very abstract, looking a little like a simplified picture of a flower. *Although from another angle*, thought Rosa, *it looks a little bit like the head of an owl...*

‘Sorry,’ said Gary insincerely, and tried to stuff a fourth dried black *thing* in his already-full mouth. Almost immediately, there was a sudden hacking cough, and to Rosa’s disgust, a piece of half-chewed scorpion tail flew across the table and caught in her hair.

Rosa sighed, and reached for a roll of kitchen paper. Bad enough the winged monkey had made off with most of the previous night’s food, she wasn’t going to let him spoil her breakfast as well. The Professor had made him apologise for taking her pasty, and they had shaken hands. Rosa had tried to be civil, after all, if the youths hadn’t been distracted, she might never have got away, but Gary had barely muttered an apology and grudgingly shaken Rosa’s hand with his small hairy paw before returning to what appeared to be some kind of space invaders game on the mobile phone that hung on a cord around his neck.

The Professor frowned, and Rosa suddenly realised he was looking at her clothes.

‘Are these all right?’ she asked, worried. Rosa had picked out a pair of jeans, and a baggy old t-shirt. It seemed to be the design on the t-shirt which had caught the Professor’s attention. It was a cartoon picture of a lion.

‘It’s from a film, I think,’ she told him, ‘Or a musical, I’m not sure which. Would you rather I changed it?’

‘Not at all,’ said the Professor quickly, although something about the t-shirt’s design seemed to have thrown him a little, leaving an odd expression on his face. At the time, Rosa thought he looked very sad, although later she realised it was more as if he had remembered something, which hurt to think about, but was a good memory nonetheless.

‘Anyway,’ said the Professor, with a sudden heartiness, ‘*someone’s* looking for you. Have you ever heard of the Earl of Dorincourt?’

An Earl’s looking for me, thought Rosa. Her heart leaped.

‘Is he my father? Am I rich then? Am I a-’

‘Princess?’ said T’Maugh, a little sarcastically, and Rosa realised with embarrassment that this was exactly what she had been about to say. Anyway, an Earl’s daughters wouldn’t be princesses, would they? They’d be... Earlettes. Earlesses? Earlinas? The Professor handed Rosa a slightly tatty roll of paper, which she unfolded.

‘They must have gone up all over town this morning,’ he said. ‘I popped out to get a paper, check for missing persons notices. Nothing in the papers, but on the way back these were all over the place.’

The flyer (it wasn’t quite big enough to count as a poster) was badly printed, with the text running at a slight angle to the edges of the paper, the words faded as if it had been copied many times.

‘LOST GIRL. ANSWERS TO THE NAME OF ‘ROSA DEW’. OUR LOVELY ROSA HAS A ‘QUIRKY’ FASHION SENSE AND A ‘CAN-DO’ ATTITUDE. SHE IS MUCH MISSED. REWARD. PLEASE CONTACT ‘DORINCOURT’ (EARL).’

Below was a phone number and crude drawing of Rosa, really more of a cartoon, although it perfectly depicted the clothes she had been wearing when she woke up on the train.

‘This one had been stuck up upside-down,’ said the Professor, ‘which was odd.’

“‘Quirky’?” said Rosa indignantly. The Professor shrugged.

‘It could have been worse,’ he said. ‘They could have said “wacky”.’

‘Or “zany”,’ said T’Maugh innocently from behind her. Rosa spun round to glare at her, but the dog’s large brown eyes met hers innocently.

‘Anyway,’ said the Professor, ‘the important thing-’

‘Or “stupid”.’

‘Yes, *thank* you Gary, the important thing is that clearly someone is looking for you.’

Rosa looked at the poster again. ‘Can I keep this?’

He nodded. ‘Of course.’

The Professor and T’Maugh knew a little about the Earl, it seemed, although they had never met him. The Earl was a recluse, the Professor told her, and had become even more so after the death of his mother, which gave Rosa a little pang of sympathy – *he was without a family too*. He was very wealthy, inheriting the Dorincourt family fortune at an early age (Rosa tried not to look too interested at that part, but T’Maugh sneezed again, so possibly she hadn’t quite managed it). The Professor went on to talk about the long family line, and their interesting history, and it was quite a while before Rosa was able to say:

‘So could I be... a niece? Or a great-niece?’

The Professor shook his head. ‘I don’t think you’re related. I spoke to his secretary. Sounds more like the Earl might be... your guardian?’

Rosa tried to contain her disappointment. ‘Did he say anything else?’

‘He wasn’t terribly forthcoming, to be honest. But he’s on his way right now. I’ll put on more tea.’

As the Professor went off, Rosa stared down at her picture. She probably wasn't royalty then. But she could be *anybody*. She could be a famous child actress, kidnapped for a ransom, then bashed on the head as she managed to escape. Or a model (*although I'm probably not quite tall enough for that*). Or some kind of prodigy, with a secret formula locked away in her head. Or...

'Do you think I might be a pop star?' she asked. Gary snorted and slouched out of the room, his wings not-quite-accidentally knocking a cup off a shelf near Rosa's head as he went. Rosa managed to catch the cup, carefully replacing it as T'Maugh looked on with a nod.

'There's your 'can-do' attitude,' she said approvingly. 'Won't-do, that's the problem with that monkey. Thinks the world owes him a favour.'

'T'Maugh!' said Rosa, annoyed, 'I said, do you think I might be a pop star?'

The dog sat on her haunches at Rosa's feet. Their eyes were almost level.

'Sing us a note,' she said. Rosa took a deep breath.

'Ahhhhhhhhhh,' she said.

'No,' said T'Maugh.



Chapter Eight

‘We’ve all been desperately worried about you, Rosa my dear,’ said the Earl. ‘Running away like that. You’ve led us quite the merry dance.’

The first thing Rosa noticed about the Earl, after the Professor had taken her through now-dark corridors to the comfortable map-lined room where their visitor was waiting, was his suit. It was sort of black, but that was like saying that the universe was ‘sort of’ big, or that having one’s arm cut off would ‘sort of’ hurt. There was a vague impression of a slim man, a little taller, and perhaps a little older than the Professor, although his skin was somehow pinker, and more expensive-looking. He was either bald, or his fair hair was cropped so close to his skull as to make no difference, but really it was all about the suit.

It was so incredibly black, it almost embodied blackness, as though the Earl was rich enough to have had the suit made directly out of the very *idea* of black. The Professor had lit a couple of small electric lamps, but they barely seemed to illuminate the dark figure sitting neatly in a poorly-upholstered chair in the corner of the room. The shape of the Earl was like a hole cut out of the world.

Merry dance? thought Rosa. *Real people don’t talk like that! He’ll call me a cheeky young scamp in a minute.*

The Earl pulled a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and Rosa leaned forward slightly, hypnotised as he gently flicked a speck of dust off his shoes. These too were black, but glossy, reflecting all the light that the suit

absorbed, shiny and deadly as an oil slick. The handkerchief vanished back into the pocket as if it had never existed, and the Earl coughed quietly. Rosa realised she had been staring, and flushed, embarrassed.

‘We?’ said the Professor mildly. ‘Us?’

The Earl sighed. ‘The servants and I,’ he said. ‘They’re the closest thing I have to family, these days. You must come and visit some time, Master S_____. My collection of oddments is a poor thing, no comparison to your own, but I’m sure you would find some of the pieces amusing.’

‘Indeed,’ replied the Professor, with no real enthusiasm. ‘I barely even make it into the town these days. I’m afraid this old place does keep me fully occupied.’

‘Must be a full time job just keeping it clean,’ smiled the Earl. ‘I’m surprised you don’t sell off a few of the smaller pieces, get some help in.’

The Professor said nothing. Rosa couldn’t bear it any longer.

‘Who am I?’ she cried, much louder than she had intended.

The Earl frowned. Rosa could see nothing on his face but honest surprise.

‘You don’t *know*?’

‘There’s been some memory loss,’ said the Professor.

The Earl leaned forward, concerned, and saw the plaster on Rosa’s hand. ‘Rosa, are you quite well? Have you been hurt?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with me.,’ said Rosa, ‘I just... don’t remember anything before a few days ago. I mean, I know that doesn’t *sound* good, but-’

The Earl shook his head, aghast. ‘S_____, I really must insist you let me take young Rosa back with me this instant. Clearly this whole episode has come about due to some awful accident. My child, let me look at you!’

He uncoiled in his chair suddenly and took Rosa’s chin in his hand, turning her face left then right, as if hoping to spot some terrible injury. His

fingers were long, and thin, and held Rosa like a vice. She found herself staring at a framed diagram of a ship just above the Earl's head. It had the head and tail of a great winged serpent.

T'Maugh was by Rosa's side in a second, but it was the Professor who reached out for the Earl's wrist. In an instant, Rosa felt herself freed, and the Earl was suddenly back in his chair, his hands held up in a placatory gesture.

'I'd like to speak to Rosa alone, if you don't mind. The situation is a little... delicate.'

The Professor frowned, and T'Maugh made a low growl, but Rosa nodded.

'Please,' she said to them. 'I'm sure I'll be quite safe. I just need to know.'

Reluctantly, the Professor nodded.

'We can wait just outside, I suppose,' he said, and opened the door. T'Maugh gave the Earl a long hard look before following him outside.

'Shout out if you need us,' she said, and the door closed. Rosa and the Earl were alone.

'Are my parents alive?' asked Rosa eagerly. 'Do I have brothers? Or sisters? Is there a school I go to? What about friends, or-'

The Earl held up a hand, and Rosa stopped gabbling, embarrassed.

'I can tell you *everything*,' he said. 'But there will be a cost.'

'I don't understand,' said Rosa. 'You want money?'

It didn't make sense. The Earl was rich, he had to be. But he was shaking his head.

'Your new friend, the Professor,' the Earl said, 'is playing a very dangerous game. He has an item I want. *I need*. And I believe you can help me get hold of it. Your help to me would be more valuable than any amount of money.'

‘Please,’ said Rosa. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest now. ‘I just want to know what happened before I got on the train. Where I came from. Who I am.’

But the Earl was implacable. ‘A red notebook,’ he said, as if Rosa hadn’t said anything at all. ‘It’s here somewhere in the Professor’s collection, I know it. You don’t need to tell the Professor you’re looking for it. He probably won’t even notice when it goes missing. But if you agree to help me in the matter, I will tell you everything you want to know, right here and now.’

Rosa stared at him. ‘You want me to lie to the Professor?’ she asked, bewildered. ‘And T’Maugh? And then steal from them?’

‘I wouldn’t have put it exactly like that,’ said the Earl. ‘But that’s the essence of the deal, yes. Agree to help me, and in just a few seconds I can answer all your questions. And I know *everything*, don’t think I’m bluffing.’

He leaned forward, staring at her intently. ‘What do you say?’ he said.

What a lovely voice he has, thought Rosa. *All soft and sweet. Like honey.*

‘No,’ she said. ‘Of course not.’

It would have been less surprising if the Earl had looked angry, or upset, or disappointed. Instead, he looked almost... impressed.

‘A brave choice, my dear,’ he said.

‘It wasn’t a *choice*,’ said Rosa. ‘It was a stupid thing to ask.’

‘Oh, there’s always a choice,’ said the Earl calmly. ‘A quick, easy path, or a long, difficult one. I’m afraid, my dear, you have chosen the latter. Let me wish you all the luck in the world. You’re going to need it.’

Rosa just stared at him. There was a knock at the door.

‘Are you all right, Rosa?’ came the Professor’s voice from outside. ‘Do you want us to come in?’

‘By all means!’ called the Earl. ‘I believe our business here is concluded, for now. I wonder if Rosa would mind waiting in the hall while I wrap things up?’

The Professor and T’Maugh entered. ‘Thinks he owns the place,’ the dog muttered under her breath. Both looked at Rosa, who was only able to shrug helplessly.

‘Don’t trust him,’ she whispered, as she brushed past them on the way out. She wasn’t even sure if the Professor heard her, but T’Maugh’s ears twitched, and her heavy tail thumped briefly against Rosa’s legs as they passed.

‘A book has gone missing from my collection,’ began the Earl, as though Rosa was no longer even in the room.

Rosa stared at him for a second, then left, quietly shutting the door behind her.

The entrance hall, like the rest of the building, was cluttered with objects: paintings of all sizes, vases and jugs crammed with dried flowers, and the covered mirrors stretching all the way to the front door. Every object here, thought Rosa, has some strange history to it, some weird tale about where it had come from, or what it had been used for in the past. She was the only thing that didn’t fit.

Sitting down on a bare wooden seat, Rosa waited for the Professor and the Earl to finish their discussion. On her lap she clutched her strawberry-coloured handbag and the holdall containing her freshly washed clothes. Everything she owned in the world, all ready to take with her when the Earl swept her off to her real life. But that wasn’t going to happen now.

Just to Rosa’s right was a stand made from what looked like scratchily-carved bone, supporting a large ball, made from green glass. Overcome by tiredness, and sick despair, she leant her head against it and closed her eyes.

‘- irreplaceable, of course.’

It was the Earl’s voice, loud and clear and sinister enough to be right next to her. Rosa jerked her head up, and the sound stopped immediately.

She stared at the glass ball. The dusty surface had been cleaned a little where she had leant her head against it. There was an emerald light at the globe’s heart that hadn’t been there before.

Gently, Rosa blew more dust away, then laid her hands flat against the smooth glass. The voice returned, this time with an image swimming to the surface: the Professor and the Earl, in the map room.

‘*Someone* stole it,’ said the Earl. The picture was greenish, and wobbled slightly, as though underwater, but Rosa could see he was sitting back in the chair now. T’Maugh and the Professor hadn’t moved.

‘I’m merely asking you to keep an eye out. I’m sure people send you all sorts of ... interesting items.’

‘I don’t deal in stolen property,’ said the Professor firmly. The Earl looked alarmed at the very idea.

‘Of course not! I’m not accusing you of anything untoward. Just informing you that if it were to come into your possession, you could make both a tidy sum, and sleep the healthy sleep of the just, were you to return it to its rightful owner.’

‘It’s odd,’ said the Professor, rather carelessly. ‘I thought you’d grown out of books, put them aside as childish things. Rather a shame I thought. From what I read, you seemed to enjoy them as a child.’

‘Then forget what you’ve read,’ snapped the Earl, suddenly annoyed.

The Professor’s expression did not change. ‘A sentimental attachment,’ he said smoothly. ‘I quite understand. Now what size is it? Quattro? Folio? Elephant?’

Elephant? thought Rosa to herself, and smiled a little for the first time. The Professor seemed to have very quietly got the upper hand of this discussion.

‘It’s a red notebook,’ said the Earl, through gritted teeth. ‘With an embossed “A” on the cover. In gold. Those are all the details you need.’

‘Or are those all the details you have?’ asked the Professor calmly. ‘You know, I would hate to think this book was never in your possession at all. That you were in some way using me to add to your own collection.’

The Earl stood, though he was careful not to get too close to T’Maugh.

‘I’ll have that book,’ he said.

‘But why do you want the girl?’ asked the Professor.

Rosa held her breath. The Earl shook his head, sadly. ‘I feel responsible for her,’ he said. ‘Her parents never wanted her, you know. She stole from them, regularly. So they threw her out.’

Rosa stared into the glass ball, feeling something nasty rising in her throat. She swallowed, and made herself focus.

‘I took young Rosa in,’ said the Earl simply. ‘My staff worked hard to look after her, gave her everything she could have wanted – and she stole from them too. Just little things at first, clothes, sunglasses, a ridiculous strawberry handbag-’

Rosa gasped. ‘It’s not true!’ she whispered.

But she had no memory, no way of knowing how she had got the things she had. In fact, what if *she* had taken the Earl’s book? Professor S_____ was clearly some kind of private collector, maybe she had planned on selling it to him. But in that case, where was the book? Rosa’s mind reeled with doubt.

‘Rosa Dew is a liar, and a thief,’ said the Earl, softly.

'I'm not!' shouted Rosa. 'I would never do those things!' But a small treacherous voice in the back of her head whispered: *you might. You don't know for sure, do you?*

The Professor frowned, looking directly into her gaze.

'Rosa?' he said. 'I...' Doubt crossed his face. It was just for a second, but it was long enough. Rosa picked up the holdall, took her coat down from the hook by the door and fled into the night.



Chapter Nine

It was no longer snowing, but the pavements were treacherous with ice. A long grey car was parked directly outside, right up on the pavement, and Rosa skidded slightly, slamming her hands on the bonnet to prevent herself running straight into it.

A small figure hunched in the passenger seat bared white teeth at her from the darkness. Despite the tendrils of long hair, she could see it was a boy, and at first Rosa guessed him to be about her own age. But she saw his eyes. They were far, *far* older.

Rosa took her hands off the bonnet, and backed slowly around the car. Then she turned and ran towards the sea front.

Stupid, Rosa thought, rubbing away tears with cold hands, to let yourself believe, even for a moment, that you might belong with the Professor and T'Maugh and Gary. And now they had been poisoned against her, and whatever the Earl had said, she didn't belong with him either. The terrible thing was, although in her heart she was sure what the Earl had said about him taking her in at Dorincourt, and her running away was a lie, in her head she knew there was no way to tell for sure. She had been foolish to expect the Earl to save her, to give her a home, and a past. No-one would care about her. She was on her own again.

But then something else occurred to her. What if the real Rosa, the person she had been before waking up on the train, wasn't like her at all?

‘I could be nothing to do with the Earl at all,’ she thought. ‘And still be a liar or a thief. Or worse.’

But right now, she had to take care of herself. With a final, decisive sniff, Rosa decided to head to the chip shop. There were a few coins left from the money the ticket-collector had given her, but barely enough for one more meal for tomorrow. The chip shop lady had seemed, well, if not exactly kind, not unkind anyway, and she might want a hand serving the food or cleaning up. Either way, Rosa just needed enough money for a train ticket away from this place, away from the Earl. The Professor would never want her in his home again, not after what he had been told, but she could send the borrowed clothes back to him, so he would know she hadn’t stolen from him at least.

Rosa jingled the sad handful of coins together, then put them back in her pocket. She knew this road. Things were looking up already, she told herself, and for a moment, she very nearly believed it.

The chip shop was closed, of course. Rosa pressed her face against the glass, and peered desperately into the darkness within, even banged her fist against the window, but to no avail. When she stepped back, she realised that a poster had been stuck to the very top of the window, about two feet above her head.

‘LOST GIRL’ it read ‘ANSWERS TO THE NAME OF ‘ROSA-’
The rest of the poster had been torn down. It was in a screwed-up ball on the pavement, half-frozen into the ice.

One place was open, a bar, brightly lit with a single long window stretching parallel to the seafront, so (Rosa guessed) people could drink their drinks watching the sun go down. The sun had gone down a long time ago, but inside the bar some people were still drinking: a group of seven or eight women, older than Rosa, but still young. They were dressed in brightly-coloured clothes,

and sipping brightly-coloured drinks, and although Rosa couldn't hear a word, they seemed to be talking lightly and cheerfully as though they didn't have a care in the world. A sign on the window read 'Help Needed'. There were no posters with her name on them, torn or otherwise. Rosa pushed the door open and went in.



Chapter Ten

‘You’re not old enough,’ said the barman, flatly. He was a young man, and seemed barely aware of Rosa’s existence at all. His attention was firmly on the young women sitting at the table by the window.

‘I don’t need to serve alcohol,’ said Rosa patiently. ‘Just do some tidying, or cleaning. I just need some money for a train ticket.’

‘I *told* you-’ said the barman, but one of the women had come over to the bar to get some more drinks, and his attention switched instantly to her.

The woman, however, looked down at Rosa, and smiled. She was beautiful – in fact all the women at the table were beautiful, but this woman was taller than the others and had a smooth grace to her movements that made Rosa feel small, and scruffy, and a little bit ashamed.

‘Aren’t you slightly young for cocktails?’ asked the woman, smiling. She had long blonde hair that flowed smoothly to her shoulders, where it ended in a perfectly straight line. *As though it had been cut off by someone using a steel ruler,* thought Rosa, awed, *or quite possibly a laser beam.*

The woman wore a simple strappy dress, which looked as if it had been designed specifically for her just moments ago, and long velvet gloves that reached to her elbows. Rosa particularly liked the gloves. They didn’t quite go with the dress, but in a way that looked as if the wearer knew that, but just didn’t care. Rosa looked into the woman’s bright green eyes and found herself tonguetied, and very slightly in love.

‘She’s a stray.’ The barman flashed an insincere smile at Rosa, and a more sincere one at the woman. ‘Ought to chuck her out really, but-’

‘You’ll do no such thing!’ The woman sounded outraged, and bent down to Rosa’s level – not patronisingly, but so they could talk as two women of the world, discussing grown-up matters. Rosa really wanted to ask her where she got her gloves.

‘Do you want something to drink?’ asked the woman. Rosa squirmed, embarrassed.

‘I don’t think I’m supposed to drink cocktails,’ she said, but even as she said it, she thought what a stupid rule it was. Why shouldn’t she drink what she wanted? But the woman smiled at her.

‘I was thinking more of a hot chocolate,’ she said. ‘Now why don’t you tell me all about yourself.’

‘Here you go,’ said the barman, placing the mug down in front of Rosa. It was frothy, and the marshmallow plonked in the top was already starting to melt. The barman reached out with a hand, as if to ruffle Rosa’s hair, but she stared at him so fiercely he changed his mind, and darted back behind the bar, where he continued to make pathetic expressions at the women. *That man, Rosa thought, might be just a little bit stupid.*

‘Rosa woke up on a train,’ said the blonde woman, very seriously. ‘She has no memory of where she came from, or what happened to her.’

The other women shook their heads sympathetically. Now she was closer, Rosa could see they were playing some kind of card game, although none of the designs on the cards looked at all familiar. She caught a glimpse of a cup, and what looked like a stick of some kind, before one of the women smiled at her and tucked the deck away into a metallic handbag. All the women were beautiful and each was dressed in clothes so simple and elegant that Rosa knew they must have come from the greatest fashion houses in the world.

‘You poor dear,’ said a dark-haired American woman. She put her hand over Rosa’s, and held it firmly. This woman wasn’t wearing gloves and her nails had an odd greenish tinge. The blonde woman shot her a quick look of what looked almost like annoyance, then smiled at Rosa.

‘Would you like some food?’ she asked. ‘Or more hot chocolate?’

‘Or some perfume?’ said an oriental woman.

‘Perfume?’ said Rosa, confused. Suddenly a silver spray appeared, and a cloud of scent enveloped Rosa. It was a little stronger than she would have liked, but not unpleasant, and it seemed to make all the women relax.

‘This is fine, thanks,’ said Rosa, trying not to cough. ‘So are you all fashion models?’

The women all looked pleased.

‘Oh, this vonn’s a keeper!’ said a woman in a thick German accent, and pushed a piece of gingerbread across the table towards her.

‘No thank you,’ said Rosa, as the head had already been bitten off. Still, they seemed so *nice*.

Rosa felt herself grinning, rather stupidly. It was funny, the women were so pretty, she felt happy just being in their company. Maybe the perfume was making her a little dizzy.

Rosa looked over at the American woman. ‘You can probably let go of my hand now,’ she said politely. The woman smiled at her, but said nothing. Her hand continued to grip Rosa’s tightly, and the nails now felt just a little less like nails, and a little more like claws. Rosa was feeling the start of quite a bad headache.

Rosa opened her mouth to protest, then saw something that made her shut it again with a snap. On the back of the chair behind the American woman was perched a small brown mouse.

She looked at the mouse. The mouse looked back at her. And then, to Rosa's utter astonishment, the mouse gave her a wink.

After a moment, Rosa winked back. The American frowned.

'Bit of perfume went in my eye,' said Rosa innocently. Her head was starting to clear a little now, and she was beginning to realise that these women were much more dangerous than they seemed. It had been a mistake to hesitate in Walmington, even for a second. There was nothing here for her but danger. As soon as she had the opportunity, she had to get out of this place: first the bar, and then the town.

The mouse put a finger to his lips, or where a mouse's lips would be if he had any, then pointed up at the ceiling.

Rosa looked up. A second mouse was crawling down the electric cord to the light fitting directly above her table. A third was discreetly making its way along the picture rail, also to a position above the table. And a fourth, leaping from chair to chair, and a fifth, using the salt and pepper pots on nearby tables as cover.

The first mouse coughed once, loudly and deliberately. The women turned as one to stare at the creature, which held up one digit for attention, and began to tap-dance.

There was a moment of silence, as the women, and Rosa, and the barman all gaped, then the other mice hurled themselves from their hiding places, teeth bared. The effect was instant, as though an electric current had been passed through them. Chairs went everywhere as the women leapt to their feet, screaming not just with terror but also with absolute rage. Fashionable boots were kicking out, trying to stamp down on the creatures which were now running in and out of expensive wigs, biting at designer label clothes, and in one instance, sneakily drinking out of a cocktail glass. These mice weren't just brave, they had *style*.

‘Kill them!’ screeched the blonde woman. ‘Kill every last one of them!’

The American was holding firmly on to Rosa, her face moving like a mask, something beneath it rippling. She wasn’t really a woman, none of them were. They were something older and darker, something that had learned to take human form.

A mouse hurled itself at the woman-thing, burying its teeth in her wrist. The creature let go, howling, and the mouse jumped quickly on to Rosa’s shoulder as she ran for the entrance. She hesitated in the doorway, and it scuttled down her sleeve on to the back of a chair.

‘Go quickly ma’am,’ he said, in what was quite an authoritative voice for a mouse. ‘We’ll clean up here.’

Behind him, the American had caught the sleeve of her dress on a lit candle, and it went up with a whoosh. The barman, who had been gaping all this time, snapped out of his trance and threw a bucket of slushy ice-water over her. The flames went out, but oddly the woman continued to burn, her skin running and dripping even as the barman fell back with shock, the empty bucket falling to the tiled floor with a clang.

‘Cor, haven’t seen a good melting for years,’ said the mouse happily, and rattled off a snappy salute. ‘Sergeant Watkins of the Roving Operations Department of the Extra-Planar Neutralisation Taskforce at your service.’

‘Best get a wiggle on,’ the mouse continued, as the blonde woman looked over at Rosa and snarled. ‘We do have an exit strategy, but it’s really for your actual mouse-sized units, if you takes my drift.’



Chapter Eleven

Rosa ran back towards the train station. This time she was looking out for weirdness.

That group of burly men in short sleeves could have been just a bunch of local lads out for a pint. Or the tattoos, and glittering gold earrings, and the wooden stump one of them had for a leg, and the parrot the tallest one had perched on his shoulder, could have indicated a rather different line of business.

Those figures, huddled at the steps of the war memorial, could have been tramps. They wore odd, mismatched clothes, and were bundled up tightly against the cold. It made sense that Rosa couldn't see an inch of exposed skin: it was a cold night. But as they turned to watch her, surely she should have been able to make out at least one pair of eyes? The tallest of them wore an old pair of skiing goggles, but it wasn't the same thing at all. Scratched lenses tracked Rosa as she passed, carefully keeping to the other side of the road.

Perhaps she should go back and tell the Professor what she had seen? But he wouldn't listen to her now, and she couldn't blame him. She bit her lip to distract herself and thought about getting on the next train instead.

I hope it's not the same ticket-collector, thought Rosa. He had been kind to her, and the thought of getting on to his train, this time with the full knowledge that she was trying to cheat him, was too much. She would check the train first, she thought, and if he was on it, she would wait for another. And she would go wherever it took her. The train would be safe, and warm, and at least she would be moving. Then she could think about what to do next.

No trains were waiting at the platform when Rosa got there. She sat quietly on an iron bench and hugged the holdall to herself as she stared straight ahead, shivering and trying desperately to remember something about her past. Anything would do. She could read, and presumably write, so someone must have taught her, but the word 'school' was... just a word. It had no meaning. She knew her name, but *how* she knew it was a mystery. After a while she gave up. It was too cold to think.

A mouse crept on to the platform, just a few yards from Rosa's boots. It was smaller than the one that had talked to her in the bar, and greyer.

'Hello,' Rosa said to it. The mouse froze, although it didn't seem to know where the noise came from. Rosa bent towards it, wishing she had some food to give it.

'Do you-' she said, but as soon as she started talking, the mouse shot through a crack in the wall and vanished.

Just a mouse, she thought.

With a sudden rumbling sound, a train appeared round the corner, travelling at high speed. Rosa grabbed her bags and stepped to the edge of the platform – then had to leap back again as it became obvious the train wasn't going to stop.

The coaches flashed past. Only a few people were travelling this time of night, and the brightly lit windows flashed their lives up like a slideshow: a group of heavy-set men wearing brightly coloured sporting tops, clearly on their way back from a football match, some teenage boys, shoving each other around, a woman sitting alone, listening to her personal stereo, a mother and young daughter looking out of the window, waving.

Rosa raised her hand to wave back, but the train had already gone. She let her arm fall to her side and turned around.

The Professor and T'Maugh were sitting on the bench. Both looked at her calmly. T'Maugh's tail wagged once, then she yawned. Rosa stared at them.

‘A friend of mine, used to be a chief constable, retired a couple of years ago quite near Dorincourt’s estate,’ said the Professor conversationally, scratching the top of T’Maugh’s head. ‘Not that the Earl knows that. Anyway, said ex-policeman owes me a couple of favours. Used to bully me at school until I learned to stand up for myself. So I made a phone call, and he made some more phone calls, and the local police know nothing about young girls missing, or any theft of a handbag, or sunglasses, or a notebook. He drinks in the same local as a young McGregor, the head gardener there. Made some tactful enquiries, and the chap didn’t know what he was talking about. Never seen anyone fitting your description near the place.’

‘But he knew my name,’ said Rosa. ‘He knows *something* about me.’

‘He asked you to work for him, didn’t he?’ said the Professor. ‘I’m guessing he said he’d tell you everything, if you’d... help him, against us.’

Rosa nodded. ‘He said you had something of his. The red notebook. Do you know what he’s talking about?’

The Professor shook his head. ‘Not a clue. It must be important if he wants it that badly. Or wants whatever information is inside it.’

‘And if he wants it that badly,’ said T’Maugh, ‘And we find it first, I’m sure we could trade it to him for all the information he has.’

‘Agreed,’ said the Professor. Then he took something out of his pocket.

‘It’s a ticket,’ he said. ‘It’ll take you anywhere you want to go in England. A single, I’m afraid.’ He held it out to her.

Rosa looked at the grey strip of card. It was a kind thought. Of course, she couldn’t deny she had been hoping to be asked to come back with them, that her heart had leapt upon seeing them again, but this was better than nothing. Much better than nothing. So why did she feel that it was so much harder to leave them this time?

‘That’s... very good of you,’ she said. She didn’t know what else to say. She took it, then frowned.

‘There’s no date on it,’ she said. T’Maugh rolled her eyes.

‘It’s not for *now*, you plum,’ she said, although she didn’t say it unkindly. The Professor looked horrified at the thought.

‘Good lord no! T’Maugh and I would like it very much if you came back with us. We have plenty of spare rooms, and we’d like to help you if we may. Your situation looks increasingly like our area of expertise.’

Area of expertise? thought Rosa.

She stared at them. ‘Are you sure?’

The Professor nodded.

‘Of course you may leave if you want,’ he said. ‘It’s important you make the choice, and I must warn you, Walmington may not be the safest place for anyone to be right now.’

Rosa looked at them. ‘There are some weird people in town. I wasn’t sure if they’d always been here, or if...’

‘If the Earl brought them.’

Rosa nodded, and the Professor scratched his chin thoughtfully.

‘They’re not local. I should have spotted them sooner, but I’m afraid my collection takes rather a lot of my attention. Most remiss of me. No, I think the Earl has made himself some new friends, and has been quietly moving them into Walmington over the last few days. He doesn’t like to get his hands dirty if he can avoid it, I think. But I have allies too.’

T’Maugh walked forward, and sat at Rosa’s feet. She was able to look Rosa almost directly in the eyes.

‘Even Gary said he’d be delighted to help out,’ she said.

Rosa frowned. ‘Really?’ she asked.

‘Well, almost,’ said T’Maugh, and sneezed distractedly. ‘When I explained that his whole head would fit into my mouth, he sort of came round to the idea.’

Rosa paused, looked down the railway track, curving away out of sight, then tucked the ticket into her pocket. She felt warm suddenly, and happy, and alive.

‘I’d love to come back with you,’ she said.

The Professor’s car was small and purple, and barely made a sound as they headed out of the station car park. The Professor started to talk about the vehicle’s amazing electric engine, but the events of the day, coupled with the warmth of T’Maugh’s heavy head on Rosa’s lap meant that she was soon fast asleep.



Chapter Twelve

Next morning, the Professor was standing by the cuttings table in the conservatory, pruning a small tree with pale silvery leaves. He plucked a small brown fruit and popped it in his mouth.

‘Toffee,’ he said rather indistinctly. ‘A little late in the season, but good nonetheless. Would you like one?’

Rosa shook her head politely.

She had lain under the covers for a long time that morning. The spare room window was slightly open, and her big brass bed felt like a snug fortress of warmth against the chill air. A thin, almost skeletal leaf had blown through the window on to her quilt during the night, and reaching over to the small table next to the bed, Rosa had carefully placed it between the pages of a blank book the Professor had given her the previous evening. He had suggested she write down her dreams every morning in case they contained something of significance, but if she had dreamed at all during the night, Rosa had no recollection of it.

When she had finally hauled herself down the stairs to the kitchen, a large cooked breakfast had been waiting for her, complete with fried egg, tomatoes and mushrooms. The egg was green. Still, she was hungry, so she’d eaten the lot, wiping up the emerald yolk with a thick slice of bread. Gary had flapped in, crammed a handful of dried scorpions into his mouth, ignoring Rosa completely, and flown out again.

‘So,’ said Rosa, because there didn’t seem to be any other way of putting it.

‘What *is* this place?’

The Professor gestured to the plastic chair. Rosa sat, feeling rather as if she were about to receive a lecture. The Professor cleared his throat.

‘What you are standing in now,’ he said, ‘is-

‘Actually I’m sitting,’ said Rosa.

‘What you are *sitting* in now,’ he said, ‘is a museum.’

Rosa frowned. ‘I thought this was the conservatory?’

The Professor blinked. ‘Well obviously *this* bit is a conservatory,’ he said. ‘But the whole building is a museum. We call it the Cabinet,’ (he said, rather grandly) ‘Of Curiosities.’

There was a fluttering of wings, and Gary appeared, seemingly from nowhere. He settled about twenty feet away on top of an ornate sundial that was propped up by two winged stone figures, an old man and a young boy. He looked startlingly graceful for a moment, balanced perfectly with the other figures, three flying creatures all brought temporarily to earth. Then he glared at his tiny mobile.

‘Clock’s not working,’ he said disgustedly, and banged it against the old man’s stone head a couple of times.

Rosa turned back to the Professor.

‘A cabinet?’ she said. ‘I thought you just said it was a museum.’

‘That’s how museums began,’ the Professor said. ‘Private collectors would store a few interesting items in a display case, then the displays would start to grow, and soon you needed a whole building.’

‘And the conservatory,’ said Rosa. ‘This is a kind of museum too, isn’t it?’

She dipped her hand into a clay bowl full of acorns that sat amongst the cuttings. They felt warm against her fingers, and surprisingly heavy. Picking one

up, she felt it *humming* in the palm of her hand, as though it was just seconds away from exploding into a fully grown oak tree. The Professor suddenly made a worried sucking noise with his teeth.

‘They’re not exactly dangerous,’ he said, ‘But they do grow rather quickly, and if any of those got dropped into soil, I really can’t afford the new windows.’

Rosa carefully put it back in the bowl, and the Professor relaxed.

‘Some of the rarest Figments in existence are out here,’ he said. ‘I’m taking as many cuttings as I can, but botany’s not my thing, and it really needs a day a week just for weeding.’

Rosa peered at the cuttings in front of her. One was an entire tree, just four or five inches high. She looked at the Professor, who nodded, and Rosa stretched out one finger. Tiny golden leaves, so small she could barely see them individually, brushed her skin. The bark was a silver grey colour, and the shallow stone tray in which it sat was carved with a swirling inscription in an unfamiliar language.

‘Bonsai Mallorn,’ said the Professor. ‘I’m glad you like it.’

Rosa smiled at him. Gary yawned loudly and started picking through his fur for fleas. Finding one, he popped it into his mouth and crunched it up, grinning at Rosa. Then he shot through a gap in the ceiling where one of the panes had broken, and disappeared out of sight.

‘Now,’ said T’Maugh, although Rosa hadn’t even heard her enter the garden. ‘The next thing you need to ask the Professor is: what’s a Figment?’

Rosa turned to the Professor. ‘What’s a Figment?’ she asked, obediently.

‘A thing that shouldn’t be,’ he said. ‘From Earth, or sometimes from another world entirely.’

‘Other planets?’ asked Rosa.

The Professor shrugged. ‘Hard to say. Certainly other planes, what we call Otherworlds, only accessible to those who know the right doorways or

enchantments. I knew some myself, in my youth. Anyway, I started collecting Figments, trying to save them really, before they were broken, or the worlds they came from were... lost.'

Rosa thought she saw a flicker of pain pass over the Professor's face, and wondered for the first time what had caused the terrible scar that lay beneath his eyepatch.

'Of course a lot of people are embarrassed by magic in the family these days,' he continued. 'They don't want a lot of old *stuff* rattling around. So when word got out someone was willing to take it off their hands, no questions asked, things just started turning up. Eventually, I had to look for somewhere bigger, somewhere out of the way, and I found an empty old house that didn't seem to belong to anyone, tucked away in a nice quiet seaside town. Although I'm sure the Cabinet wasn't quite as big back then. Funny thing, no matter how many figments turn up, it never quite gets full.'

The Cabinet is a figment itself, thought Rosa.. *It has to be!* Excitedly, she opened her mouth to tell the Professor, then saw the amused look on his face and shut it again. He knew. He had worked it out long ago.

'Nowadays,' the Professor said, 'Things turn up that weren't even addressed here. At first I thought the figments had just enough magic to get themselves to a safe place. Now, I can't help but wonder if the Cabinet is somehow... drawing them here.'

Rosa looked at T'Maugh.

'And that's where you're from, too,' she said. 'You and Gary. I mean you're not *things*, but a flying monkey and a talking dog aren't exactly normal, no offence.'

‘None taken,’ said T’Maugh. Indeed she sounded more amused than offended. Rosa propped her elbows on the table, rested her chin on her palms and thought for a second.

‘So the Cabinet is a sort of... refuge?’

‘It was never supposed to be,’ said the Professor, softly.

‘But everything here is in some way... magical,’ said Rosa in wonderment, but T’Maugh sighed.

‘Not everything,’ said the dog, a little sadly. ‘Most have had their magic drain away over the years. Swords that once sang are now silent. Doorways that were open are closing now as this world draws further away from the others. People like their machines too much, you see. More reliable than magic, easier to throw away and replace.’

‘But there is still some magic here,’ said the Professor. ‘Otherwise people like the Earl wouldn’t be interested.’

‘His car,’ said Rosa. ‘That’s a machine, but it’s a Figment too, isn’t it?’

‘The Prototype,’ said the Professor rather dreamily. ‘Chain drive, seventy-five horsepower, and a six-cylinder engine strong enough to power a Zeppelin. There is another, but that is as a child’s toy compared to the Prototype. No, this is an older, darker thing, built for secret masters, who gave it hidden powers of its own.’

‘Right,’ said Rosa patiently. ‘The thing is, I’ve seen it before.’

The Professor, stared at her, as did T’Maugh.

‘When I got off the train and walked into the town, a car drove past me. An old one, silver grey, the same one I saw outside the Cabinet, although I didn’t realise till later. The windows were blacked out, so I couldn’t see who was driving. But there are two?’

‘Only one on the road,’ said the Professor.

‘There was a person sitting inside as well,’ said Rosa. ‘A boy.’

‘We only saw the Earl,’ said the Professor. ‘But if he drove past you earlier...’

‘Why didn’t he spot me?’ said Rosa. ‘He slowed down as if he had, but never stopped, or said anything.’

‘Odd behaviour for someone who later puts up posters looking for you,’ mused T’Maugh.

The Professor lifted his eyepatch slightly and rubbed underneath, then let the patch return to its place.

‘Itches sometimes when it gets cold,’ he said. There was a long silence. Through the glass roof of the conservatory, Rosa could see the morning sun trying to break through the snow clouds. Against the odds, a shaft of sunlight broke through, illuminating twinkling particles of dust hanging in the air. Or maybe it was just more snow.

‘I really must get that window fixed,’ said the Professor absently. ‘If the weather continues like this, none of the plants will survive.’

‘You said you had... allies?’ Rosa reminded him gently. The Professor clapped his hands together, making a sound like a gunshot in the still air.

‘Indeed!’ he cried, suddenly enthusiastic. ‘Phone calls to be made, strings to be pulled! And, if what the Earl told us was even half-true, mysterious red notebooks to be found!’

Rosa found herself smiling, dragged along by his enthusiasm.

‘But first, I think,’ he said, ‘a cup of tea.’

‘I’ll make it,’ said Rosa.

‘Excellent stuff,’ said the Professor. ‘A willingness to make tea is the first step to a great adventure.’

‘No sugar for him,’ said T’Maugh, getting wearily to her feet. ‘It makes him go funny.’

‘Funnier, surely,’ said the Professor, and scratched between her ears. T’Maugh’s tail wagged, and for a moment, Rosa saw how affection and annoyance could blend together into a spiky kind of love. The Professor looked at her and winked.

‘Let’s make a start,’ he said.



Chapter Thirteen

The library was a small, high-ceilinged room, that was at least ninety percent book. Not a scrap of the original wall could be seen, and the only light that filtered in came from a strip of window twenty feet above Rosa's head. Everything else was a bookshelf. Even the high ladders that ran around the base of the walls on castors had bookshelves built into them. The Professor was up a ladder now, frowning at the endless rows of cloth and cardboard spines.

'It's not looking hopeful, I'm afraid,' he said.

It wasn't. They spent the entire morning going through every book in the library. There were red books, and notebooks, but not a single red notebook. At one point Rosa thought she had struck lucky by spotting a thin reddish spine, but it turned out to be an orange exercise book filled with drawings of worms. So she slid it back on to the shelf, between a copy of 'Jacob Wrestling' (Author: J. Mountmain) and 'Sea Gunner's Practice, with Description of Captain Shotgun's Murdering Piece' (Author: R. Blastem).

'Have you ever thought of arranging books alphabetically under 'author'?' asked Rosa.

The Professor blinked at her. 'Good lord,' he said. 'I never have. Do you think it's worth a try?'

'Just a thought,' said Rosa weakly.

They took a break for tea. The Professor liked something called ‘Masala Chai’, quite different from whatever they had drunk the previous night, apparently, although to Rosa it just tasted like... tea.

‘Now,’ said the Professor, ‘Odds are this mysterious red notebook is somewhere in the Cabinet. The Earl certainly seems to think so. He’s probably using a false claim of theft to try to get us to find it for him, and then hand it over and merely count ourselves lucky not to have been sued.’

‘Sounds the sort of thing he would do,’ said T’Maugh.

But every book in the Cabinet is here in this library, and though I agree my filing systems sometime get a little, um, *unorthodox*—’

T’Maugh and Rosa exchanged looks. The Professor pretended not to notice.

‘- I think we’ve been pretty thorough. And there’s not a red notebook to be seen. If we only knew something about the contents!’

‘Or who had written it,’ said T’Maugh.

‘Or... *what* had written it,’ said Rosa slowly. The others looked at her.

‘Well,’ she continued, a little defensively, ‘I’ve met enough talking animals in the last two days to think there might be some *writing* animals as well. Couldn’t the original owner of the notebook, this “A” person, be a dog, or a horse, or—’

‘A mouse,’ said Sergeant Watkins, from the top of the sideboard.

‘Good to see you, Sergeant,’ the Professor said, rising from his chair and executing a surprisingly neat bow. ‘Rosa, I believe you and the Sergeant have already met.’

Rosa tried to curtsy, although she was halfway through the process when she realised she didn’t know what a curtsy actually *was*, so she converted it into a bow instead. It wasn’t terribly graceful, but the mouse seemed to appreciate the gesture.

‘R.O.D.E.N.T. send their regards,’ he said to Rosa, and winked. ‘H’extensive workout we had there, whole nest of the blighters. Most of them got away I’m afraid, but still, good experience for some of the young ones, what don’t even know how to wash behind their ears.’

‘Sergeant, any news on the notebook from amongst your people?’ asked the Professor.

The mouse shook his head. ‘Not one of ours,’ he said.

The Professor let out a disappointed sigh.

‘Although...’ said Rosa slowly.

The others looked at her.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘The notebook may not have been written by a mouse, but what’s to say it isn’t mouse-*sized*? I mean, it’s just as likely to be giant-sized, I suppose, but that would be quite easy to spot, and...’

She stopped. The others were staring at her.

‘What?’ she asked, wondering if she’d said something particularly stupid.

‘Small people,’ explained the Professor. ‘As in *really* small people – about the same size as the Sergeant. Not that he’s... I mean, he’s a jolly good size for a mouse...’

‘No offence taken Professor,’ said the Sergeant, although Rosa thought she saw something of a glint in his eye.

‘They left this world many years ago,’ continued T’Maugh. ‘No-one knows where they went, or even why. But they haven’t been seen since.’

‘And their leader,’ said the Professor, looking slightly annoyed at being interrupted, ‘had been a great explorer in her youth, although her family were boot-makers by trade I think. Her name was Altimetra.’

‘Then she could be the ‘A!’’ breathed Rosa,.

The Professor shrugged. ‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘Altimetra was a great writer. If she had kept a log of all her travels, it’s certainly the sort of thing the Earl would want for his collection. But if he doesn’t know who wrote it...’

‘He wouldn’t know how small it would be?’ asked Rosa.

The Professor nodded, his eyes shining. ‘Which gives us the advantage!’

‘But not the book,’ T’Maugh reminded him.

Rosa wanted to scream. They were so close, she could feel it, and now they had run straight into a dead end. For a moment, the only noise in the room was the tiny clicking sound of the Sergeant’s feet as he paced up and down the sideboard, paws behind his back.

‘I’d best be getting to HQ,’ the mouse announced finally. ‘Any objections to setting up a temporary base here in the Cabinet?’

‘I’d be glad to have you around,’ replied the Professor. ‘The more of us here, the more chance we have of finding the red notebook – if indeed it’s here at all.’

‘It’s here,’ said Rosa firmly. ‘I’m sure of it. The Earl knows it’s somewhere in the building, but we’re not seeing it.’

‘Agreed,’ said the Professor, and sighed. ‘I’m going to go through all the shelves again, just to make sure. Perhaps I could get Gary to show you round some more of the Cabinet? Wouldn’t do him any harm to stop playing games on his mobile for five minutes. Unless you want to help’

Rosa thought of the idea of spending an afternoon in the company of an annoying, pasty-stealing winged monkey. Then she looked at the dusty shelves, crammed full of books in no obvious order, stretching up to the ceiling.

‘I’ll go and find Gary,’ she said.



Chapter Fourteen

The monkey had agreed to the role of guide with some reluctance, and when Rosa had asked if there were any more animals in the Cabinet, he had heaved a heavy sigh. Still, apparently there was a Natural History Gallery, and it made sense that Gary be the one to take her to it.

‘Are there any more like you here?’ asked Rosa politely, as she strode down the corridor, trying to keep up with the monkey without actually breaking into a run.

‘Not exactly,’ he replied, a little sourly, banking again and heading through an open archway into the dark room that lay beyond. Wings fluttering, he landed on an umbrella stand. He flicked a light switch with his tail, and Rosa gasped out loud.

The gallery before her stretched as far as the Botanical Gardens had been long, with display case after display case thrown into illumination as a series of overhead lights came on. Rosa was able to count to six until the gallery was fully lit.

The first thing she saw was a group of winged monkeys, just a few metres into the gallery. They seemed to be hovering in mid-air, though none of them were making any sound. She opened her mouth to start arguing with Gary: there were five monkeys in all, and each was clearly of the same species as her reluctant guide, when she realised that none of the monkeys’ wings were moving. Then she saw the wires from which the monkeys were suspended, and the glassiness of their eyes.

‘Oh,’ she said.

‘Stuffed,’ said Gary. ‘Thoughtless, I call it. Imagine how you’d feel.’

Rosa could. Shivering a little, she pushed one of the monkeys with her finger. It swung easily on the wire, its shadow gliding over the grey and yellow brick patterned floor. Rosa felt Gary’s disapproving look and caught the stuffed monkey with both hands, gently moving it back into its original position.

‘Sorry,’ she said.

Rosa walked further in. In a large display case to her left, a spider was rearing up on its back legs, its head on a level with hers. Someone had made an attempt to recreate its natural setting: the back of the case had a number of fir branches piled up in it, and on the rock-effect floor Rosa could see a number of small unidentifiable creatures wrapped up in greying strands of web. The spider itself was very fat (or perhaps badly stuffed), and was missing one of its legs. Its fangs too, were rather worn-looking. ‘Spider (Giant),’ read the label on the case, reasonably enough.

The case on the opposite side held a large number of small humanoid creatures, each about a foot high, though no two were quite the same. They were rather dried out, like rows of tiny mummies, though by peering closely Rosa could see each of them had fragile-looking, beautifully-coloured wings. The label on this display read ‘Fairy Husks.’

‘Eurgh,’ said Rosa, drawing back from the case rather quickly.

‘Well where do you think fairy dust comes from?’ snapped Gary. He was perched on the head of an enormous polar bear, posed upright in a rather aggressive-looking posture. The battered iron breastplate it was wearing didn’t make it look any less intimidating, while the long-handled axe gripped in its right paw was fully twice Rosa’s height.

‘Never really thought about it,’ said Rosa, honestly. She peered at the next exhibit, which seemed to consist of very small and slightly tatty dragons floating in jars. Suddenly, a nasty thought occurred to her.

‘The Professor didn’t... kill any of these things, did he?’

Gary laughed, a short mocking sound. ‘Course not! Well, apart from this one.’

Rosa stared at him. ‘The bear? The Professor killed that bear?’

Gary shrugged, not seeming terribly interested. ‘Well, T’Maugh helped him. Anyway, it had gone mad, killed loads of people, so the Professor put it down, really. Sort of a mercy killing. The other bears didn’t mind. Said they’d have done it themselves if they’d got there first.’

Rosa took another look at the bear. There was a tear in the breastplate, just over the heart, as though someone had pushed a blade right through the armour. The fur around the bear’s arm was gashed with teeth marks as well. Rosa had a sudden vision of a terrible battle in the snow, blood spilling on the frozen ground...

‘Wow,’ she said, suddenly seeing the tall man in the baggy cardigan in a whole new light. ‘Is that when he got the eyepatch?’

Gary was picking through his fur, apparently in search of fleas. He found one, and, rather disgustingly, popped it in his mouth.

‘Nah,’ he said, chewing noisily. ‘Had that as a kid. Train crash or summink.’

Rosa frowned, but kept walking into the gallery. The next display was, like the spider, placed in an action pose.

‘That’s new,’ said Gary. He sounded puzzled.

An enormous caterpillar was reared up to at least twice Rosa’s height, its segmented body resting back upon itself, like a snake about to strike. Unlike a snake, however, stumpy legs could be seen on each segment, while its hide was a mottled greeny-blue. There was an odd smell in the air. Rosa leant forward and sniffed.

‘Eurgh,’ she said. ‘Smells like something nasty from the garden.’

She looked up at its head. It was bright red, with shiny yellow eyes, and a complicated mouthpiece that seemed to involve a large number of moving parts.

‘Don’t move,’ said Gary, very quietly, from somewhere behind her.

The great head angled down, very slowly, until the great yellow eyes, compound like those of a fly or a wasp, were looking straight into Rosa’s. The mouthpiece opened smoothly, like an intricate machine, revealing rows of sharp, knifelike teeth that stretched as far back into the creature’s throat as far as she could see. The creature hissed, a horrid bubbling sound, and Rosa felt the thing’s hot breath on her face.

‘Oh bum,’ said Rosa.

