

CHAPTER 13

Weirdly, Col was back in bed. It reminded him of respawning in a game. A new location, a new life. His first thought, as you'd imagine, was that it (the diggers, the fall) had all been a dream. He even went to check his phone in case he'd missed any camera alerts. But it was as he shifted his body that he realised something was wrong, that *something* being the dull pain he experienced in pretty much every part of his body, including his soul.

'Ow,' he said.

And then alongside the pain came the realisation. He'd not been dreaming. He'd *actually* fallen off his window ledge, smash-bang down through the conservatory. How bad was the damage? To the conservatory, that is, not his body – bones would mend. Col wasn't worried about that.

His allowance was tiny enough already without having to spend the next thirty years paying his parents back. They'd weigh his injuries against the value of the smashed glass. Before deciding how to act in front of them, he'd need to check how much destruction he'd wrought.

Col inspected his hands. Lifting them actually didn't hurt. It was more of an ache, a dull throb round his shoulders. And they looked fine, very much like hands. There were no cuts or anything. He wiggled his fingers. They were all fine too. Full wiggle capability.

Next he checked his phone. His first shock was that it was 11.09 in the morning. And there was a message from Lucy – any news? – and the sharp memory that he'd been crawling about outside to get a better look at the diggers.

Gritting his teeth, Col slipped his legs from under the duvet. His left ankle felt thickly sore (or sorely thick), as if he'd turned it, but there wasn't a bruise or anything. His legs were as free of cuts as his hands. He stood up. Wait, that hurt a bit actually and, worryingly, in a place he'd never felt pain before. Right in the small of the back. He stretched his spine. His bones cracked in protest. His finger followed the stony lumps of his backbone down until it reached the soft spot, and that hurt some more.

Okay. As long as he didn't stretch too often, he should be fine. (The opposite of Dad's running advice.) He limped across to the curtains. He pulled the left one open. This was more difficult than you'd think, and the right side of his body complained.

The window was closed. He released the latch. With his arms shaking and the pain of the effort causing him to sweat, he pushed up the window. He stuck his head out. Below was a Col-shaped hole in the roof of the conservatory.

It seemed a long way down. His right hand pinched the skin on his left hand, just to check he wasn't a ghost. It hurt, and more than it normally would, which was good. That said, he wasn't totally sure that ghosts couldn't feel pain. It would explain why they were always moaning.

He looked at the corner of the garden. It was very empty. What had the diggers done when he'd fallen? Had they helped him? Had Ross been there?

'Why are you out of bed?'

It was Mum. She'd obviously stayed home to look after him. Her face was soft, and she offered an unconvincing smile. Her question hadn't been harsh – more concern than criticism.

'Just trying to keep active,' said Col, although his

heart wasn't in it. 'I'm fine,' he added, getting back into bed. He noticed her face harden a little. 'But I *do* hurt.'

There: it returned to its earlier softness. 'Oh, Col. What happened?'

'I fell out of the window.'

She turned up her tight grin a little. For a moment, she didn't speak.

'We worked that much out. There was a tremendous bang and breaking of glass. We thought the house was being broken into. Your father found you in the conservatory armchair. He thought you'd fallen asleep there. And then he noticed the hole in the roof and the glass everywhere. And . . .' Mum lifted a fist to her mouth. Briefly she looked like she might bite it. 'And he said you wouldn't wake up.' She took a breath. 'We called an ambulance, Col. It took forty-two minutes to arrive, what with the strikes and everything. They said you were fine to stay at home. They said you must have landed in the armchair. They gave you painkillers. It's a miracle you're not seriously hurt.'

She took a step into the room.

'Can I ask a weird question?' Col said, and Mum nodded. 'Was there anyone else around? Was it just Dad?'

‘I came down too. What do you mean? I don’t understand.’

‘I was just wondering if next door dropped in or anything. That’s not a joke. Dropped in. I mean came over. Noah, maybe?’

Now nobody likes to upset their mum. (Hi, Mum! Hope you’re enjoying this! I love you!) In fact, it’s a truth of human existence that there’s no worse person to upset. And so Col, having initially been guided by the importance of highlighting how much he hurt, in order to get away with smashing a hole in the conservatory roof, now felt guilty.

‘It’s okay, Mum. I feel okay.’

Instantly: ‘What a year! First the floods, then this! God knows how much it’ll cost to repair the damage you caused. Your dad thinks it’s structurally unsound—’

Col cut his mother off before she could start talking about pocket-money reductions.

‘But if you had an ibuprofen I wouldn’t say no,’ he said, wincing as he did so (and, in all fairness, he did have quite a sharp throbbing behind his eyes).

Mum shook her head. But more in pity than in anger, and not (just to be clear) because she was turning down his request for pain relief.

‘Your dad said something about cameras. About birdwatching. But in the middle of the night? Be honest, Col. I’m not angry with you. Dad is, but I’m not. I just want to know what happened.’

Col lay there and looked at his mother. He imagined what would happen if he told the truth. He imagined the disbelief, the telling-off. This was a moment when surely a slight editing of the facts was acceptable. And anyway it was obvious that she *was* angry with him.

‘I wanted to make sure the cameras were lined up for decent footage at dawn,’ he said. ‘That’s when the birds come out . . . to do their thing.’

The words were about as convincing as a lower-school play. He really should research garden birds if he was going to persevere with his cover story.

‘I’ll get you the tablets,’ said Mum quietly.

Col didn’t want to spend too long thinking about what had happened or how lucky he’d been in the night so, as at any time that he wanted to avoid thinking, he turned to his phone. Already the stiff pain in his back had lessened, replaced by a dull ache. Maybe this was how it felt to be old? Briefly he felt sorry for his parents.

Before replying to Lucy, he checked the camera app. Expecting nothing, he flicked through the moments

before the fall. And yes, one second his back was obscuring the lens and the next it wasn't. But, with the night's single piece of luck, the camera had been left in a position that looked over some of the garden. And so Col had managed to capture the two diggers escaping. And, get this, he'd also caught what they took with them.

A metal detector.

A shovel.

And you're not going to believe this, but being held, cradled like a baby, was a sword.