

The
STAR-SPUN
WEB

For my mother and father, and the people of the North Strand

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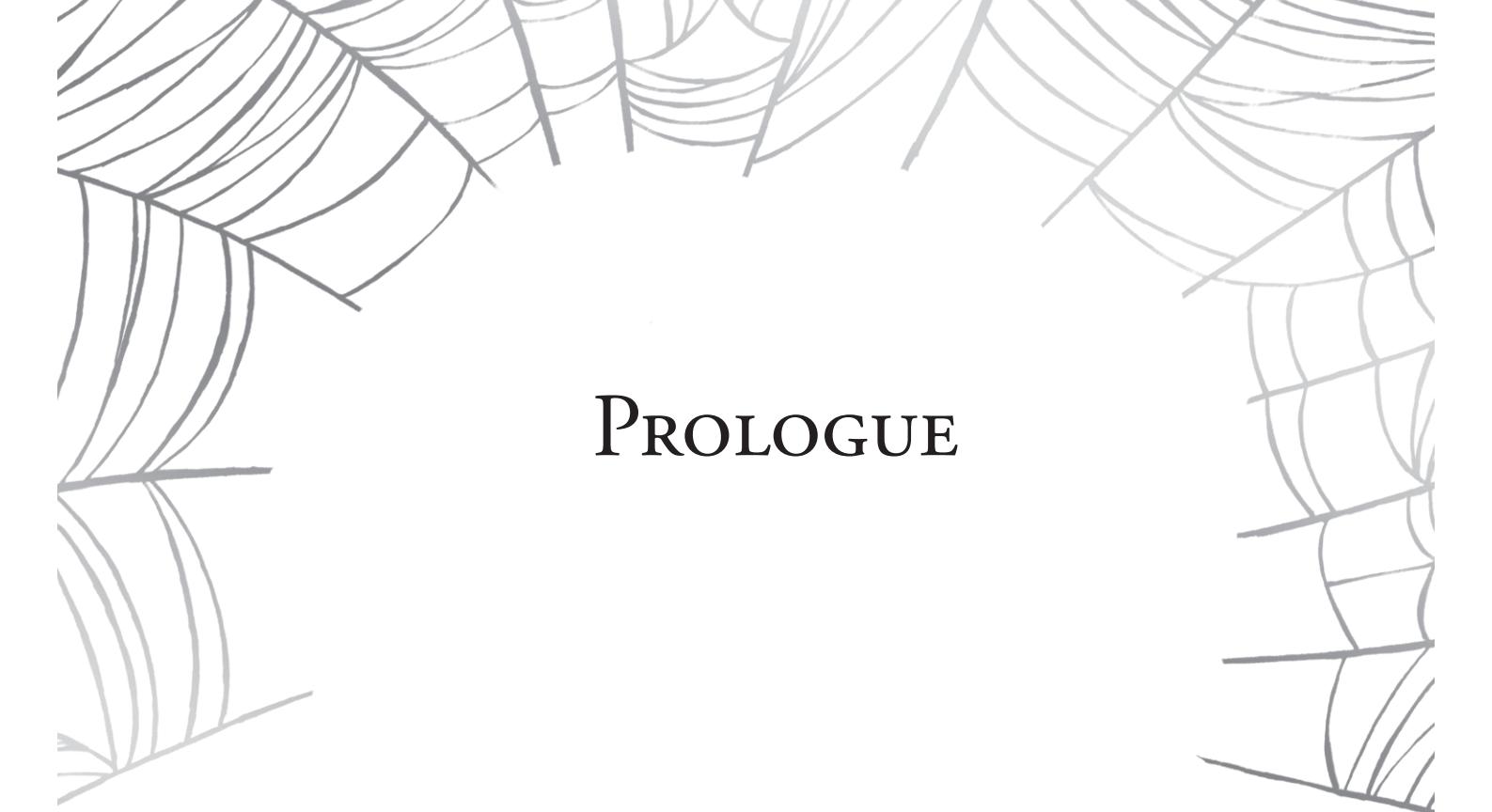
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SINÉAD O'HART

Stripes



PROLOGUE

Through the hollow darkness of a winter's night, a man was running.

"It's all right, darling," he murmured to the tiny baby bundled in his arms. "Not much further now." Snow fell all around them making dizzying patterns in the air; the going underfoot was slushy and the man's feet were cold. His mind flashed with quick, sharp thoughts, made painful by anxiety. What had they done with his wife? How long did he have before they came looking for him? Would he have time to get the baby to safety? One thought was so urgent that it drowned out all the others: *she'll only be two worlds away – will it be enough?*

His thoughts were shattered as a sudden cry split the air, loud and shrill – a call of triumph. It came from behind the running man, from the far end of the street.

He stopped, peering over his shoulder through the lacework made by the snow. *Lights*. Indistinct figures moved against the night, muffled tightly in scarves and hats, and another voice shouted. A face, pale in the darkness, turned in his direction.

The man spun round and began to run once more. The tram wires overhead seemed to hum despite the lateness of the hour and he hopped across the tracks as he made a desperate dash across the road, landing heavily on the pavement at the far side. He paused long enough to catch his breath, feeling his heart hammer, and then he was off again.

Through it all the baby – his daughter – slept, as though she were tucked safely in the nursery he and his wife had prepared for her, when things were different.

Seconds later he came to a slithering halt outside a tall narrow building on a street corner that faced a wide bridge over a streetlight-speckled river. It loomed into the night sky like a pale cathedral, its roof lost in the darkness. He gazed up, hoping he had the right place. Quickly he settled his child into the crook of one arm while he pulled an object smaller than his palm from a pocket with his other hand. He adjusted its face, listening for the *click*, and then rubbed his thumb across the object's surface. A void opened at its centre, the barest *whir* giving away the complex mechanism that powered it. He raised the object

to his eye, peering through the void, and looked at the building again.

He saw the differences straightaway – shutters closed where they had been open, a flowering window box where there shouldn't be – and his throat tightened. He glanced up, reading the words above the doorway. In this world, at this time, the building was an insurance company headquarters, but he had to hope that what he'd seen was true and that somewhere else it bore a different name. *A place where she'll be safe*, he thought. *A home*.

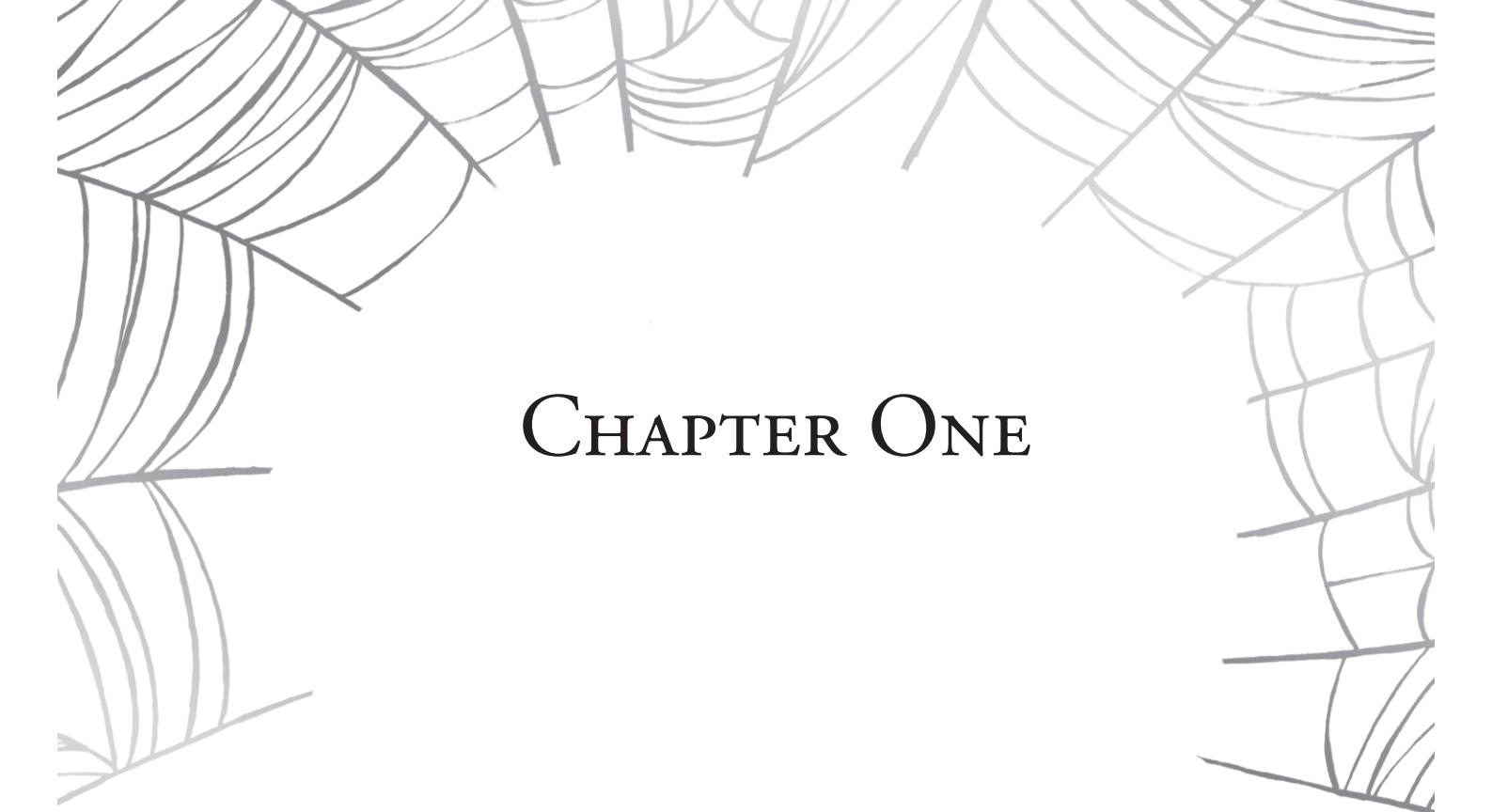
He kneeled, the snow trickling through his thin trousers, and laid his daughter down as gently as he could in the alcove of the building's front door. He checked one last time that the envelope thick with banknotes was securely tucked into her blankets, and he placed the object in beside it, making sure it was hidden from view. Then he kissed the baby's warm forehead. He sobbed, the pain of losing her so soon after his wife almost too much to bear, before gritting his teeth and getting to his feet. He turned his back on his baby and stepped out into the haze of the street lights, snow patterning on his suddenly empty arms.

“I’m here!” he roared, his tears hot. “Come on then! What are you waiting for?” The man strode into the middle of the road as the snow flowed around him, glancing down the shadows of the street he’d just come from where

dark-clothed figures lurked. They were closing on him, not bothering to hurry now. They had no need.

The man faced them down, his chest heaving, his throat aching and sore. Slowly they circled him, as though mocking everything he had lost.

Finally he clenched his fists and ran straight for them. The sound of their truncheons raining down on his head and back made the baby's eyes pop open in shock. She opened her tiny mouth to cry, but between taking in a breath and letting it out again she vanished without a trace.



CHAPTER ONE

In the basement of Ackerbee's Home for Lost and Foundlings, two young girls were at work. One had a pair of glasses perched on her nose and her pet tarantula Violet perched on her head. In each hand she held a piece of thin wire and she was gradually – and very carefully – bringing them closer together. The other was watching, breath held, and trying not to get in the way.

“Steady,” said the first girl, her dark eyes fixed on the gap between the wires. “Almost there...”

Unfortunately her friend – lost in admiration for the science taking place before her very eyes – chose just that moment to nudge some glassware with an unwary elbow and a round-bottomed beaker crashed to the floor.

There was a sudden spark as the wires the first girl had been holding met unexpectedly quickly, followed

by a babble of apology from the other, who was already dropping to her knees to collect the shards of broken glass.

“Sorry!” she said for the tenth time in as many seconds. “I really am! I didn’t mean to, Tess, I swear.”

Tess sighed before joining her friend on the floor. “I know, Wilf. Your timing is perfect though. As usual.” She picked up the larger pieces of beaker with the skill that comes from long practice; Wilf averaged two breakages a week.

Wilf – who had discarded her given name, Wilhelmina, as soon as she was old enough to say it and long before she was old enough to know how to spell it – reddened. “I’m never going to be a scientist if I can’t stop destroying my equipment,” she muttered.

Tess looked at her friend. “Don’t be silly, you goose,” she replied. “You’re *already* a scientist. Just think of it as a study of gravity. Or,” she continued, holding up a shard and peering through it, “an examination of the smashiness of glass.”

“That’s not a word,” Wilf scoffed, though her green eyes shone with amusement in her pale face.

“I just *said* it, didn’t I?” Tess retorted, placing the shard carefully into her palm. As she reached for the next piece, her tarantula stirred on her head. “What’s up, girl?” she murmured, glancing upwards.

“Is something wrong?” asked Wilf, but before Tess had

a chance to answer, the door to their ‘lab’ was opened. Tess felt Violet relax, settling back into the tangle of Tess’s hair.

“Girls?” came a voice they both knew.

“Miss Whipstead,” Wilf said, getting to her feet. “We’re down here.”

“Ah. Wilhelmina. Another breakage?” their teacher said with a fond smile.

“Just a small one,” Wilf replied, blushing again.

“Never mind, eh?” Miss Whipstead said, throwing her a wink. “Now, Tess? Miss Ackerbee needs you upstairs.”

Tess clambered to her feet. Violet began to thrum a bit, sensing her worry. “Miss Ackerbee needs to see *me*?”

“As I said. Can you come now, please? It’s a bit of an emergency. Leave that clearing up to Wilf – I’ll come and give her a hand in a minute.”

“An emergency?” Tess echoed. She took off her ‘lab coat’ (really an old raincoat that she liked to imagine was white and equipped with many very useful pockets) and threw it over a nearby chair. Then she closed her experiments notebook, which had been sitting open on her workbench (really a spare classroom desk used mainly for detention), and folded it in two before sliding it into one of those very useful pockets. Violet skittered about a bit on top of her head. “Shush, girl. It’s all right,” Tess muttered to her, reaching up a finger for the spider to cling to. She met Wilf’s worried gaze and tried to give her a reassuring smile.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Wilf asked. Miss Whipstead glanced at her and shook her head.

“Miss Ackerbee just needs Tess for now, Wilf. Don’t worry,” she lied in a too-bright voice.

“See you later,” Tess said, giving Wilf’s arm a quick squeeze as she passed. Wilf nodded, frowning.

“It’s nothing to worry about, girls,” said Miss Whipstead, holding the door open as Tess and Violet ducked under her arm. She glanced back at Wilf as they left the room. “You’ll be back to your experiments in no time, I’m sure.” Wilf sighed, turning back to the clear-up as her teacher closed the door.

“Do you know we’re *this* close to doing it?” said Tess, turning to Miss Whipstead wide-eyed. The teacher smiled, even as she shooed Tess up the corridor. “Actually making a faradic spark – real *electricity* – from seaweed!”

“If anyone can do it, it’s you pair,” said Miss Whipstead. “I have no doubt.”

“What does Miss Ackerbee need me for?” Tess racked her brain quickly, trying to see if there was anything she’d done recently that she hadn’t yet owned up to.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Miss Whipstead reassured her. “You’re not in trouble is all I know. Though goodness knows you *ought* to be.” Tess glanced up at her, but the teacher’s eyes twinkled.

They climbed the basement stairs into the house’s

large kitchen and Miss Whipstead paused for a minute to evaluate Tess's appearance. After telling her to clean her glasses, wipe her breakfast off her face and pull up that one sock which insisted on slipping down, she was deemed fit to appear in the parlour. "Remember," whispered Miss Whipstead as she knocked on Miss Ackerbee's door. "You're not in trouble."

"Thanks," Tess replied, smiling up at her. Then she stepped through into Miss Ackerbee's domain, feeling knock-kneed. There wasn't often cause to stand in this room, and Tess found it was rarely a good thing for anyone to be summoned before the housemistress.

"Tess," said Miss Ackerbee, turning from a tall filing cabinet in the corner. "Why don't you take a seat?"

Tess did as she was asked, feeling somehow untethered, like she could just float right up into the corner of this tall room. She glanced out of the window, hoping that would help to keep her steady.

"Now." Miss Ackerbee sat behind her desk. A short stack of paperwork topped with a blanket was within her reach. She folded her thin brown hands and took in a deep breath. "I suppose I'd best begin in the most obvious place. A man came for you today, Tess. A man who has laid claim to you and wants to take you away from here."

Tess swayed in her chair. She grasped its arms, fearing she might fall headlong on to the carpet otherwise.

“My – my father?” she croaked.

Miss Ackerbee shook her head, closing her eyes momentarily. “No. I don’t believe so. In fact, I don’t believe he is any relation to you, despite his assertions to the contrary.” Tess listened, hauling breaths in and out, hoping she wouldn’t be sick. Violet reached down a forelimb to stroke her forehead and she began to calm.

“So – who was he?”

“Before we get to that, Tess, let’s have a chat. Have I ever told you properly about the night you arrived here?”

“Well, you said I was found in a blanket, on the doorstep...” Tess’s words trailed away as her eyes found the blanket on Miss Ackerbee’s desk again. “*That* blanket?” She looked up at the housemistress.

“This blanket,” Miss Ackerbee replied. “And it contained more than just you, though you were gift enough by yourself.” She smiled at Tess, who was too overwhelmed to return the gesture. “There was an envelope full of money, which was useless as it was in a currency nobody had ever seen. And there was this.”

Miss Ackerbee’s hand slipped between the folds of the blanket. When it re-emerged, it was clutching an object small enough to nestle in the hollow of her palm. The object was made of metal but Tess couldn’t have said what sort – it looked dark, like brass. It was round, a short cylindrical thing like something you might keep

buttons in, though it was far too elegant for that and the swirling web-like pattern which swept across it made it look like something that had been grown not made. There were markings around its upper circumference, a bit like those on a clock face to denote the hours, or a compass to indicate direction, except there were eight of them. Each was a different colour and one seemed to be discoloured or tarnished somehow. It looked out of place.

“Is it – is it for false eyeballs?” said Tess, her gaze fixed on the small metal box.

Miss Ackerbee froze. “I beg your pardon?” she said.

“It’s just something I read once. A man kept his false eyeball in a tin exactly like that one.”

Miss Ackerbee’s lips twitched. “I have no idea what this object is, Tess, but as far as I’m aware it has nothing to do with eyeballs of any sort.” She paused to place it on the table in front of her. “And remind me to monitor your reading material a bit more closely,” she murmured, sliding the box towards Tess.

“So – what is it?” said Tess, who hadn’t moved from her chair.

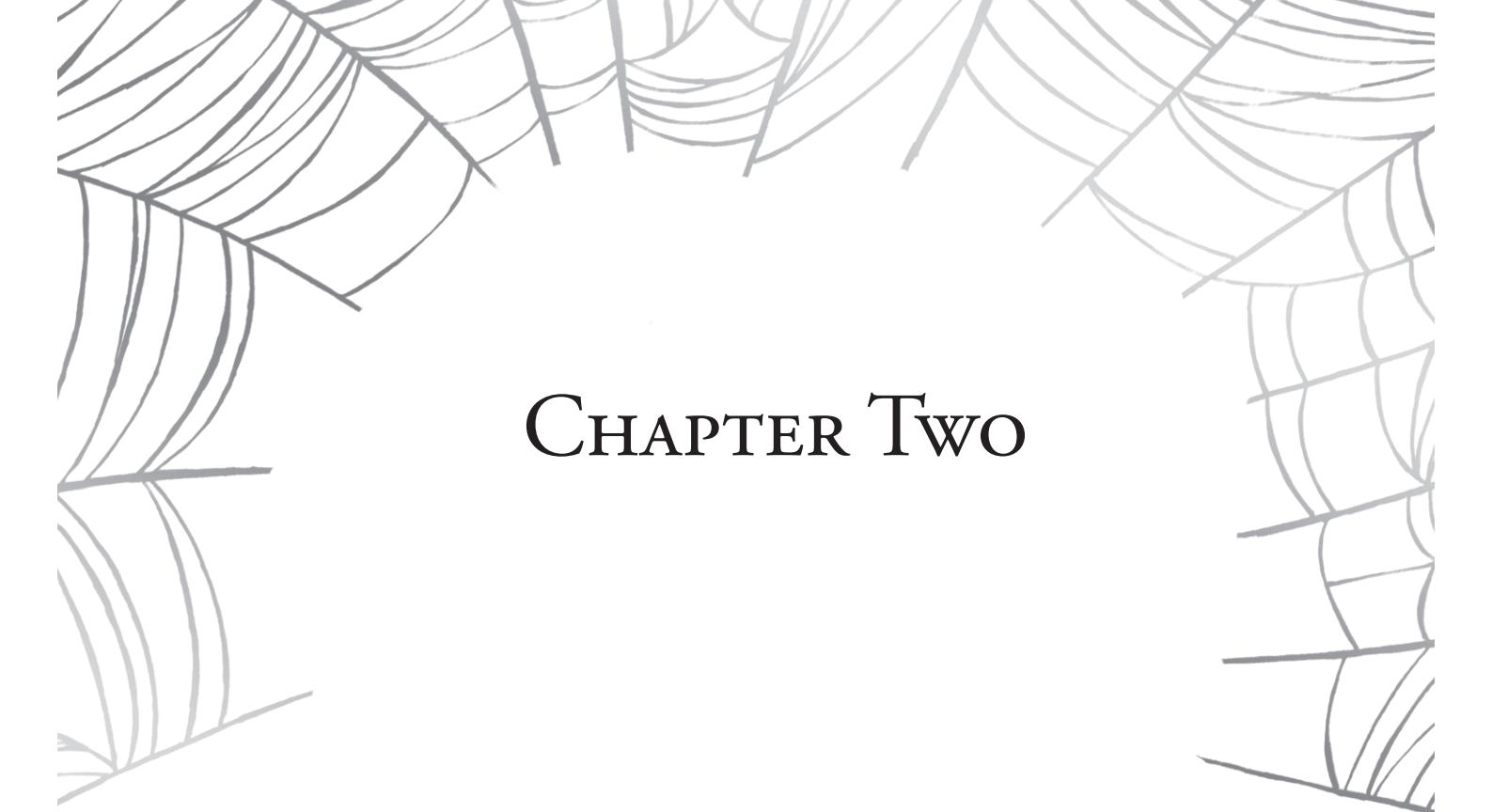
“I made a thorough examination of it when you arrived here,” said Miss Ackerbee. “In case there was a clue to your identity or your family. But when I discovered I had no idea what I was looking at, I put it away and it’s been in that filing cabinet for the past twelve years.”

“And why are you giving it to me now?”

“I had intended to give it to you when you reached eighteen, or as soon as you decided to move away from this house to forge your own life,” said Miss Ackerbee. “Along with every last note of the money we found with you in the hope you could make use of it somewhere. But that’s just the problem.” Miss Ackerbee sighed, taking off her spectacles to rub at her eyes.

“What – what is?” said Tess after a minute.

“My dear, I don’t quite know how to put this.” Miss Ackerbee kept her eyes shut as she paused to think. Eventually she opened them again to gaze at Tess. “It is my considered opinion that neither you, nor the money you arrived with, nor indeed this object, come from anywhere on this earth,” she finally said, settling her spectacles back on her nose and fixing Tess with a look that was, given the circumstances, surprisingly calm.



CHAPTER TWO

Tess gaped at the object on Miss Ackerbee's desk as Violet trembled in the midst of her hair. She wanted nothing more than to get up, walk out of the room, run up the two flights of stairs to her own snug dormitory and pull her blankets over her head.

"I don't..." she finally managed to say, "I don't know what you mean."

"My girl, I hardly know what I mean myself," said Miss Ackerbee with a sigh. "All I know is that this object is somehow inextricably tied up with you and that you are an extraordinary girl. A most extraordinary girl indeed."

"Am I?" Tess was dazed. She'd never imagined she was extraordinary and wondered how extraordinary people were supposed to act. Probably, she thought, they weren't supposed to go about with one sock up and their glasses

smudged, and she wondered if Miss Ackerbee mightn't be mixing her up with one of the older girls.

Then Miss Ackerbee began to speak again and Tess did her best to focus.

“When you were very little, Tess, you used to disappear. Just – *vanish*, like that, out of the blue. You’d only be gone for five or maybe ten seconds at a time, but it was enough to make my heart skip.” Miss Ackerbee gazed at her with steady brown eyes.

Tess blinked at her. “Um. Miss Ackerbee, I don’t think that’s—”

“Possible?” Miss Ackerbee finished Tess’s sentence. “I didn’t think so either. Not until I met you at least.”

“But where did I go?”

Miss Ackerbee licked her lips and took a deep breath. She stared at her desk and it looked to Tess like she was trying to find a pattern in the swirl of knots in the wood. Finally she looked up. Her kind face was earnest, as though she hoped Tess would believe what she was about to tell her.

“The night you came to us, I was here. In this parlour. Drinking a cup of cocoa. The entire house was asleep and I was standing by my window, gazing out at the river and indulging in a bit of thought.” She smiled at the memory. “And then, out of the blue, a shimmering circle appeared in mid-air – just for a second, you understand. Had I blinked

at the wrong moment, I would have missed it. It hung right in front of the door, before winking out of existence again. But it was there long enough for me to see.”

“See what?” Tess asked.

“A man. Young and thin, and frightened. He looked up at the door of Ackerbee’s. Snow was falling all around him. And then he was gone. The next thing I knew, there was a wail. I put my cup down on the windowsill and ran to the door – and there you were in the porch, wrapped in this blanket.”

“And where was the man?”

Miss Ackerbee smiled, but there was sadness beneath it. “He wasn’t there, Tess. And all around you was snow, tiny flakes in your blanket and even one on your baby eyelash, which I wiped away.” Miss Ackerbee rubbed her forefinger with her thumb, as though reliving the moment. “Except it wasn’t snowing that night. Not in this world at least.”

Tess fought to understand. “You said that before – ‘this world’. What does that mean?”

“I think,” Miss Ackerbee began, speaking carefully, “that you have the ability to move between our world and other worlds, Tess. I’m not sure how, but that’s my theory.”

“Other – other *worlds*?” Tess scrunched up her face.
“Like – different planets?”

“No, I don’t think so. Other versions of this planet is what I mean. Different realities might be a better way of putting it, perhaps.”

Miss Ackerbee lifted the blanket off the pile of paperwork, opened the topmost folder and began to flip through some documents until she came to a collection of letters, speaking to Tess all the while. “When you were very small and your extraordinary abilities began to appear, I made some discreet inquiries of a scientific nature. Over the course of making those inquiries I made a friend who, until a few years ago, was a professor of physics in a university in Ostravica.”

She glanced at Tess and smiled. “Several years ago he wrote to me about an idea he was working on, something he was calling the ‘many worlds theory’, which basically means, as far as I understand, that all possible versions of our world might exist simultaneously. They don’t interact because they can’t – or at least that was his thinking at the time.”

Miss Ackerbee began to flick through the letters until she found the one she was looking for. “Here we go. *Could it be true, then, to say that everything which could exist, does exist somewhere? That every choice made creates a ‘branch’ in effect, where both outcomes can come to independent fruition, each entirely unknown to the other? It would mean an almost unimaginable abundance of universes, but who is to say such things cannot be true?*” She looked back at Tess. “Such things can be true, Tess. You are the proof.”

“I – I don’t know what to say.” Tess’s mind was a whirl.

Many worlds? It was too much to think about all at once so she seized on the one thing Miss Ackerbee had said which she could fully understand. “Why can’t I do it any more? The vanishing thing?”

Miss Ackerbee placed the bundle of letters down. “It stopped happening when you were about four, I think. Up to that point you might flicker in and out ten or twenty times a day. Only myself and Rebecca – Miss Whipstead, I suppose I ought to say – were aware of it, because we made sure one of us was with you all the time. We kept a log.” She glanced at the pile of paperwork again. “Date, time, length of absence. Just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

“You didn’t come back,” said Miss Ackerbee simply, meeting Tess’s eye. “But you always did. And then you stopped.” She looked up, her gaze settling on Violet, who sat still as a stone on Tess’s head. “Which, incidentally, coincided with Violet’s arrival here at Ackerbee’s.”

“So now Violet is from some other planet too?” Tess said, her voice wavering. “I really don’t—”

“Violet is simply a spider,” interrupted Miss Ackerbee, “but she has one extraordinary quality – she was loved. By you. From the moment you saw her. And that was enough to keep you here.”

The girl cradled the spider close against her chest, thinking about the day they’d first met. She remembered

the magician who'd come to Ackerbee's to entertain the girls one rainy afternoon. How he had pulled cards out of sleeves, handkerchiefs out of hats, and made shilling pieces appear from behind Miss Ackerbee's ear. Most of all, Tess had been transfixed by the spider living on his lapel like a colourful brooch. That spider had been Violet's mother, whose clutch of babies hadn't long hatched. The tiny tarantulas had been like walking jewels and Tess had fallen in love with Violet as soon as she laid eyes on her.

"Here you are then," the magician had said, holding Violet out on the end of one finger, like a tiny black berry. "I'll give her to you. Seems like you're made for one another." Tess remembered looking at Miss Ackerbee for permission, her dark eyes meeting the housemistress's darker ones, and how Miss Ackerbee had nodded, smiling in bemusement at her odd little charge. Violet had crawled on to Tess's shoulder that day and she'd never left.

Tess brought herself back to the present, lifting Violet until she could look into her shining cluster of eyes. They were as familiar to her as her own.

"And Violet was an anchor," Miss Ackerbee continued. "A tether to this world, which kept you from slipping out of it. Rebecca and I worried what would happen to you if anything happened to Violet, but we were lucky. She's robust and you take excellent care of her."

Tess blinked hard, trying not to embarrass herself by letting the tears behind her lids leak on to her face. “It’s a lot to deal with, I know,” Miss Ackerbee said, removing a handkerchief from her sleeve and sliding it across the desk. “And we don’t have a lot of time. The man – his name is Mr Norton F. Cleat – will be returning in a few hours and he wants to take you with him.”

“Who is he?” said Tess, wiping her nose with Miss Ackerbee’s handkerchief before scrunching it up and handing it back to her.

“Why don’t you keep that one, dear, I have plenty,” Miss Ackerbee replied, waving the handkerchief away. Tess stuffed it into her pocket. “And as for our friend Mr Cleat, well, I simply don’t know who he is. But I know his claim to you has to be a weak one, no matter what legal papers he can conjure up. Proving it, however, will take time – time that we don’t have at the moment.”

“But what does he want with me?”

“Nothing good, I fear,” said Miss Ackerbee, gazing at Tess with concern. “Which means we need to think about what to do with you.”

“Can I ask one more thing?” said Tess.

“Of course, dear,” Miss Ackerbee replied, her smile suggesting she already knew what the question would be.

“The man. The other one, I mean – the one in the circle in the air. Who was he?”

“It’s only my theory, Tess,” Miss Ackerbee replied, her voice measured and careful. “But I think – in fact I’m fairly certain because it could hardly be anyone else – I think that man was your father.”