



CHAPTER I A FLYING VISIT

The air crackled and shimmered. A dirty tabby cat with a broken tail sniffed through a bin, ignoring the smell of burned hair wafting over the alley. The tip of its crooked tail was gently smoking, but the cat was unbothered. Perhaps the cat didn't mind. Perhaps cats understood when time and space were in conflict. It howled when an enormous man in a long dress and a pointy hat landed on it – so, actually, it did mind. Quite a lot.

The wizard scrambled off and dusted himself down.

'Sorry, Cat,' he said, tossing his tangled black hair over his shoulder.

The wizard wrinkled his bulbous nose and pulled his velvet cloak away from the damp stone walls. Another fizzle and pop; the air bent itself inside out, and a green bag hung upside down like a bat. The cat fled with the rest of its nine lives. The bag dropped to the ground with an ‘Oof!’ It extended four legs, shook itself like a wet dog and nuzzled the large man’s robes.

‘Right then. Come on, you.’ The wizard crept out from behind the bins. The bag followed close on his heels until it caught the whiff of cat and waddled away down the alley. A shrill whistle soon had it trotting back.

The wizard wagged a sausage finger at the bag. ‘Now then, we’re supposed to be undercover. You know that, you daft lump. Blending in, that sort of thing. Do you think they have cat-chasing luggage in...?’ He held a grubby piece of paper up to the scant light that prodded at the shadows.

The letters glowed and shifted across the paper under the wizard’s finger.

‘Scutter’s Alley?’

He tutted and lifted his robes out of a muddy puddle with an empty drink can floating in it. The wizard was distracted by a high-pitched chattering.

TUS' CERTS
LALEY

He took his tall hat, which had *The Magnificent Johnny* embroidered on the brim in fancy gold letters, off his head and turned it upside down, then he reached in and pulled out a squirming monkey. The monkey wasn't an ordinary monkey, even if it did jump up and down on a dustbin and chatter. It was wearing a dirty white T-shirt with 'Sidekick' written on it. The monkey's fur wasn't furry enough, its face was too flat, and its legs were too stumpy. It looked like a mad scientist had taken a toy monkey and brought it life. And then taught it to speak. Which was fairly close to what actually happened.

The wizard listened to the babbling monkey. 'Ah yes, of course. You're absolutely right,' he said.

So, with a flutter of his fingers and a little puff of smoke, the wizard changed out of his wizarding robes. Shabby brown trousers and a scruffy coat were more suitable for a dirty alley in the poor part of town.

The Magnificent Johnny bent down and gave his faithful bag a good old scratch. Blue light danced from Johnny's fingertips. 'Sorry old boy, it's not for long.'

The bag thudded to the ground. It now appeared as just an ordinary bag, stained from years of travel and

completely legless. The strange monkey had stopped capering about and sat grumbling on the bin.

Johnny raised his hands like an orchestra conductor about to start a concert.

‘Really, Master? Do I have to?’ The monkey scratched itself and scowled.

Johnny frowned back. This was serious business. ‘You know you have to, Monkey.’ Johnny held his breath and sat down on a sturdy bin. The bin groaned. He breathed out slowly. ‘Monkey, look at *that*.’ Johnny pointed. Splinters of glowing light skittered along the ground. They climbed the walls and fireworks jumped through the air. The lights burst from a hunched figure crouched on the pavement in front of Number Twenty-Six.

‘Her Glimmer. I dunno why it’s so special. All young witches have the Glimmer.’

‘Monkey! Don’t you lie to me,’ Johnny said.

‘Sorry.’ Monkey pulled his stumpy, crossed fingers from behind his back. ‘It’s bigger and brighter than a normal Glimmer. She’s special.’

The sky looked like a rainbow had exploded. Puddles of oily blackness oozed after the fragments of colour. One caught up with a spark of light, pounced and devoured it.

‘You see that too, don’t you?’ Johnny whispered.

Monkey nodded. ‘Dark energy. Have you seen any Screechers?’

‘Not yet, but they won’t be far behind. All that dark energy is a picnic for them. She needs someone to watch out for her. She’s a halfling. That’s why her Glimmer’s so bright. If Screechers find her and take her to a Dark One...’

‘The end of the worlds?’

The Magnificent Johnny rubbed at his face like it was playdough. ‘She needs you, Monkey. We’ve talked about this. You’ve got to watch out for her. She’s in danger.’

‘Why can’t you tell her? Then she can learn how to use her powers.’

Johnny shook his head. ‘It doesn’t work like that. She doesn’t know who she is, and it’s not up to me to tell her.’

‘Well, why can’t the Great Elspeta tell her? Why can’t *she* look after her?’ Monkey demanded.

‘Elspeta’s a Guardian now. She’s banned from magicking. All her power is being used to keep the Gateway shut,’ Johnny said. ‘You need to watch out for the girl. Not for long. When she’s thirteen, she’ll

be apprenticed. Keep her out of trouble until then.'

'And you promise not to do anything sneaky? Like put a love spell on me?'

Johnny winced. 'No, of course not.' After all, a binding spell wasn't a love spell, was it?

The monkey scowled. 'Well, what about the other bit? You know, the prophecy and all that?'

'Oh, we don't have to worry about that,' Johnny said. 'Elspeta's got the Gateway shut, and the prophecy can only be fulfilled when the gate is opened. By the time anyone works out how to do that, the girl will have her powers under control. It'll be fine.'

He patted the monkey's woolly head. 'Sorry, it won't be for long.'

The monkey took a deep breath, then fell off the bin. He lay still on the pavement – button eyes, wool fur, and a filthy T-shirt. Johnny scooped him up and shoved him in the green bag. He swung the bag over his enormous shoulder and lumbered down the alley to meet the girl huddled outside Number Twenty-Six.

Raine's skin prickled. A cold breath whispered past her cheek but the alley was empty, except for a cat crashing about in the bins. Just the wind then. Dark clouds tumbled and chased each other above the crooked rooftops. The sky and her stomach grumbled together. There must be a storm coming. She stirred the puddle at her feet with the toe of her grubby sneaker. The water shone as if someone had poured petrol in it.

She scowled at her reflection. Nope, that didn't work. She couldn't do angry. Not with those big, brown eyes. Cow's eyes, according to Bruiser. No wonder everyone in Scutter's Alley called her Drippy Raine. She'd looked it up in the classroom dictionary after the first time. Then she'd locked herself in the toilets for a good cry. It meant stupid and weak. The only person who didn't call her Drippy Raine was Bruiser, who called her **That Girl**.

Her pointy nose sniffed back at her from the dirty puddle. She wiped it with her sleeve, and ran a bitten fingernailed hand through her hair. Useless. It was like trying to comb a sheep with a spoon. Her arms goose bumped under her baggy jumper.

Behind her loomed the most fallen down house in the poorest street at the wrong end of town. Her

house. Her stomach rumbled and tied itself into an empty knot.

Raine squinted in the dusk at a figure stomping up the alleyway. Great. Old Mr Phartz, their landlord. Come to moan about late rent. She could go indoors and get out of the cold but what was the point of giving Bruiser another chance to yell at her?

A round shadow fell across her feet, hiding her reflection. A big man, with a crumpled face and dirty clothes, eased down next to Raine and lay a tattered old bag at his side. He patted it and mumbled, ‘Good boy’. But that couldn’t be right. People didn’t talk to bags.

Raine scooted away, dropping her book into the puddle at her feet with a splash. The man picked it up, shook it and handed it back. She ran her thumb over the smooth cover. Dry. Her skin prickled and the hairs on her arms stood up. Her nose twitched. ‘How did you do that?’

‘You must be Raine. You’ve got your dad’s eyes and your mum’s nose,’ the man said, as if he hadn’t heard her question.

‘Who are you?’ No one ever talked about her dad, not even Mum. ‘What do you know about my dad?’

The man sighed. He scratched a mole on his chin

with a dirty fingernail. 'I didn't know him well, only met him a couple of times. Nice bloke, though.'

Johnny held his hand out. 'Pleased to meet you. I'm an old friend of your mum's. Well, more like family. You can call me Uncle Johnny.'

Raine bit her lip. Should she run away? She wasn't stupid. You didn't last long in a place like Scutter's Alley if you were. Here was a huge, smelly stranger, seeking her out in a deserted street and sitting a bit too close. But he knew her name. And her dad. And he said he was a friend of her mum. Her frazzled little mum didn't have any friends.

'How do you know Mum?'

'We worked together,' Johnny said.

'Doing what?'

'Umm.' The black fingernail crept back up towards the mole. A mole with a hair growing out of it. *Yuck.* 'Sort of security.'

Security? Oh dear. Uncle Johnny was bonkers. But he was more interesting than anyone else she'd spoken to in a while. It beat being inside with Bruiser. Raine held out her hand. It disappeared inside Johnny's.

Burning pinpricks stung her skin as something

hot and itchy reached inside her and tugged, sending her flying up off the pavement. She whizzed past the houses in a speeding blur, the air whooshing out of her lungs as she crashed into a chimney. She wrapped her legs around it, the red bricks digging into her skin through her jeans. She slid and scrabbled for a hole to wedge her fingers in.

Clinging to the chimney, she squinted at the ground below. Who was that down by the road? She couldn't be on the ground and on the roof at the same time, but she could see Uncle Johnny holding her up by the armpits down below. Lights shimmered in the air all around them. The world and her head spun. She gulped. What was happening? Her stomach lurched and rose in her throat. Could she be sick without an actual body? She swallowed and gripped the chimney tighter.

Far below, Uncle Johnny bent over and muttered in her ear. The air sizzled. Raine shot down and thudded back into her body. She opened her eyes. Her fingertips tingled and her head whirled. It felt like the time her school went on a trip to a farm, and she had accidentally touched an electric fence. She stretched out her hand. A flash of blue burst from her fingertips. It streaked over Johnny's head and smashed straight through her front room window.

Oh no! Bruiser! A light snapped on. A furious voice boomed through the shattered window and across the street.

Johnny cursed and pulled open his bag. He glanced at the sky; his head cocked to one side. What was he looking for? Raine stared past him to the window. That was impossible. Wasn't it? She wiggled her fingers. Only one way to find out. Johnny lunged, closing his fist around her hand.

'No!' he snapped. 'You can't do that here!' He scrabbled around in the bag next to him. He pulled out an old, dirty toy and threw it in Raine's lap.

Lights flickered on all down Scutter's Alley. It wouldn't be long before everyone was leaning out of their doorways to see what was going on. Then she'd be in for it.

Johnny stood up and dusted off his trouser legs. He bent over Raine. 'This is Monkey. He was your mum's. Then he was mine. Now he's yours. You need to look after him, and he'll look after you.'

Raine poked the toy. Johnny grabbed her hand and pressed the monkey into her grip. Electricity sparked between them, hot and sharp. He was telling the truth. *I can feel it. I trust you.* She picked up the monkey and held it as far away as she could.

It might survive a hot wash. Then she could stick it on a shelf in her room. Hidden behind something a bit less childish.

The door to Number Twenty-Six crashed open.

‘Bruiser! Mum!’ Raine yelled.

Bruiser stood framed in the doorway. A hulking figure in a stained vest; his muscled, tattooed forearms stretched out to his sides. His long, hairy fingers curled around the door as if he was about to rip it from its hinges. Elsie, Raine’s mother, peeked around from behind him like a mouse round a pit bull.

Bruiser thumped out onto the cracked pavement. Johnny was nowhere to be seen – he had gone, his bag with him. Raine clutched the toy in her arms. Bruiser would try and take it. He always ruined everything. But Uncle Johnny had given it to her for a reason, whatever that might be. *It’s mine*. She raised her chin and glared.

Curtains twitched all down the street. No one dared come out and complain when Bruiser was around. Her mum sneaking under Bruiser’s arm, squealed and clamped a hand over her mouth. She scanned the sky.

Bruiser grabbed Raine by the shoulder, shaking

her so hard her teeth clacked together. ‘What’s this?’ he snarled, trying to tear the monkey from her hand.

‘Get off me!’ Raine yelled. She sank her teeth into Bruiser’s hand. He growled like a bear and shook Raine so hard her shoe fell off and landed in the puddle. She kicked him. Her bare toes connected with his shin, sending shockwaves up her leg. Fire flashed in her toe. Had she ripped a nail off? He roared. She held on tight to the monkey. Bruiser wasn’t getting his hands on it.

Gripping Raine’s shoulder tight enough to make the bones crunch together, Bruiser thundered into the house with Elsie clinging to him.

‘Stop!’ Raine’s mother pleaded. Elsie clawed at Bruiser’s back, hanging off him like an extra coat. He stormed down the damp hall towards the kitchen, dragging Raine with him.

‘That girl can sit and think about what she’s done! That window will have to be paid for!’ Bruiser opened a door and flung Raine inside.

She slid down a flight of wooden stairs and smashed through a stack of cardboard boxes. The door slammed behind her. Bruiser didn’t bother locking it. Raine crouched in a ball, the toy monkey cradled in her arms. No way she was going to cry.

Not about Bruiser. *I can't believe I bit him! And kicked him!* Whatever had got into Drippy Raine? She'd never done anything like that before. She buried her face into its matted, grubby fur. The monkey felt warm, like a hot water bottle. It did stink a bit though.