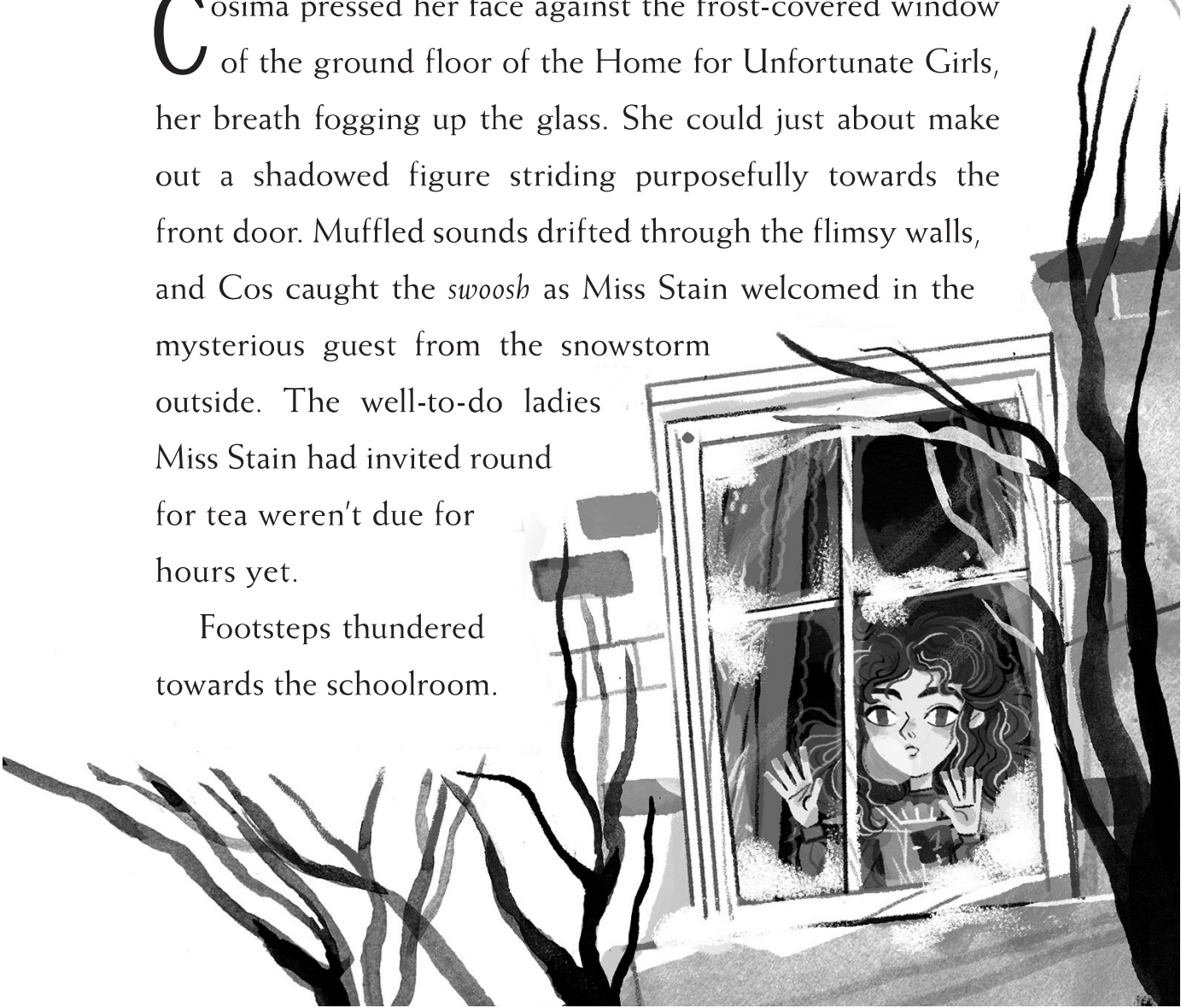




CHAPTER ONE



Cosima pressed her face against the frost-covered window of the ground floor of the Home for Unfortunate Girls, her breath fogging up the glass. She could just about make out a shadowed figure striding purposefully towards the front door. Muffled sounds drifted through the flimsy walls, and Cos caught the *swoosh* as Miss Stain welcomed in the mysterious guest from the snowstorm outside. The well-to-do ladies Miss Stain had invited round for tea weren't due for hours yet.

Footsteps thundered towards the schoolroom.

'Mr Stain is coming,' Cos hissed to the others. 'Hide everything!'

As fast as she possibly could Cos creaked herself upright, her joints performing a cacophony of painful clicks. Activity buzzed through the schoolroom as maps were torn down from the wall, contraband items hidden hastily under loose floorboards, and Diya shoved her half-finished invention into the cupboard.

Cos grabbed her walking stick, made from an old broom Diya had found in the back of a cobweb-covered cupboard, and limped across the groaning floor. She sat with a thud on a cramped school desk just as a peephole embedded in the door opened.

A beady eye peered inside, glaring at the children. Cos tried to look as innocent as possible as Miss Stain's brother, the



equally awful Mr Stain, surveyed the room, counting under his breath to make sure all were present and accounted for.

Cos glanced around at her friends. All were dressed in identical uniforms and hunched over desks, staring glumly at the old rope they were unpicking.



'Number one, back to work!' Mr Stain barked at Cos. 'Miss Stain wants each of you to unpick three pounds of rope by tonight.'

Huffing, Cos grabbed the rope coiled upon the desk and began picking apart the fibres.

Number one, she thought mutinously, is not my name.

She glowered at the wonkily sewn 'number one' on her uniform. When a child arrived at the Home for Unfortunate Girls, they were immediately assigned a number. Most children were prised from their families when they were older, and their disabilities had become unignorable. But Cos, who had arrived at the home when she was a baby, was number one.

That fact clogged in Cos's throat like the almost inedible gruel the Stains fed their charges. She swallowed it away and a hopeful fluttering soared in her belly. One day she would uncover her past. Not *if*, but *when*.

Mr Stain finally slammed the peephole shut, and Cos immediately let the rope fall from her hands.

She stood up, wobbling a little as she leaned into her stick. 'Afternoon tea with their ladyships doesn't start for hours, the baker's dropped off the goods and now an unexpected visitor has distracted Miss Stain,' Cos whispered, as soon as Mr Stain's footsteps faded into nothingness. 'It's the only time today when she won't have her hawk-eyed gaze on the kitchen door. This is our chance!'

There was a murmur of agreement from some of the girls,

but others still stared resolutely at their rope.

Cos sighed. They'd given up. She couldn't blame them. But Cos was a firm believer that a mouthful of cake had healing properties, and she was determined to cheer her friends up. She turned to the three girls nearest to her: her best friends in the home.

'I'll need a crack team to pull this one off. What do you think, Mary?'

A scraggy blonde-haired girl at the desk next to Cos wrung her hands and bounced her knees up and down. The number fifteen was embroidered on her pinny. She abandoned the section of rope she was pulling apart to grab her trusty wooden clipboard, which she twizzled absentmindedly between her hands.

'I dunno, Cos. She'll lock us away with no dinner when . . . I mean *if* she catches us.' As Mary spoke, her breath billowed out in puffs and her teeth chattered. The weather had been bitterly cold lately, and the Stains weren't for wasting roaring fireplaces on their charges.

'But I've devised a fail-proof plan!' Cos protested, her bottom lip protruding. Her friends were woefully pessimistic about the chances of all her – *rather fantastic* – ideas.

'I bet you haven't!' A loud voice huffed in consternation. Diya paused her task of rope-picking. She rolled herself away from her desk, the wheels on her wheelchair squeaking noisily.

Diya had brown skin and a swoosh of silky hair, an overstuffed tool belt slung across her waist and an oil slick smeared on her cheek. As a toddler Diya had been struck down with polio, a horrible disease that had left her legs paralysed. The number ten was visible on her crumpled dress. She raised a questioning eyebrow at Cos.

Cos sighed. She could almost picture the complex calculations running through Diya's gigantic brain that would inevitably judge Cos's ideas as lacking.

'If we take your past shenanigans into consideration,' Diya continued, spinning her favourite home-made spanner between her fingers, 'the projected success rate of this particular caper is nought point three per cent. Remember the time we crept into Miss Stain's bedroom in the dead of night because *you* thought she might be a bloodsucking demon in disguise?'

Cos crossed her arms. 'It was a reasonable theory!'

On the desk next to Diya Pearl stifled a rare giggle. She was carefully painting a purple emperor butterfly on to her wrist. It joined the other paintings of dragonflies, moths and bees that she'd decorated her ink-covered arms with. She'd also scribbled on her uniform, obscuring her assigned number: thirteen. Pearl, like Cos, was a medical mystery. Doctors called her behaviour *abnormal*, but Cos thought that short-changed Pearl's wonderfulness. Pearl liked spending time alone, found talking to new people tricky and hardly ever smiled, which

made it even more special when Cos coaxed a grin out of her.

'Or –' Diya barely paused for breath – 'when you were convinced that running away to become pirates was a good idea. Miss Stain caught us before we made it out of the front door. We didn't even have a ship!'

'I still stand by that one,' Cos muttered under her breath.

'And I haven't got to the fortune-teller debacle yet!'

'Let's refocus on the plan at hand,' Cos said quickly. 'Pearl, how are your forgeries coming along?'

At the sound of her name Pearl hopped up from the desk she'd been sitting at, tucking her paintbrush behind her ear. 'Remarkably well, considering the last time I ate cake was three years, four months, two weeks, four days and approximately twelve hours ago.' She prised open her desk, revealing a whole host of cakes and pastries.

An 'Ooh' escaped Cos's mouth. Her tummy twisted in hungry knots as she eyed a cherry Bakewell. The Stains barely fed the girls enough gruel to get them through the day and the pastry looked scrumptious. The icing glistened in the dusty gloom of the schoolroom as Cos reached out a finger to poke the cake. It was rough to the touch and felt like rope. *It was rope*. Fake cakes were a key part of Cos's plan, and Pearl (as usual) had created them brilliantly.

'I think these might be your best fakes yet. Those fancy ladies won't be able to tell the difference until they take a bite.'

Pearl's mouth twitched into a slight smile that warmed the pit of Cos's stomach, like a sunny spring day after a hard winter.

Pearl was a master crafter. She could make the most amazing creations out of the huge coils of rope Mr Stain left piled on the schoolroom floor. The only other thing Pearl needed was paint and a brush. Cos was in charge of sneaking in Pearl's painting supplies, Diya's inventing bits and bobs, and any other contraband items her friends needed. She'd managed to strike up a friendship with the grocer's boy, and in return for tipping him off about when Miss Stain was out so he could deliver his goods without being shouted at, he brought her items from the outside world. She'd also become an expert at pinching things from the Stains and recycling old and unwanted rubbish the matron chucked out. With her paints Pearl had transformed the dull brown rope into a myriad of wonders.

Cos turned her attention to Mary. 'Have you plotted out the potential pitfalls?'

Mary twitched as she tiptoed towards the old apple crate where the children stored the nuts and bolts, paint supplies and Cos's collection of pilfered newspapers. Mary had what Miss Stain referred to as 'an annoying level of hysterical neurosis', but to Cos she was a protective friend who just worried a lot about getting everything right. Because of that Mary liked to plan for every possible (and sometimes nearly impossible)

eventuality for everything that the girls did.

Mary grabbed an age-curled scrap of paper and unfurled it, placing it upon her Diya-made clipboard. Scrawled all over it were potential problems they might encounter on their flight to the kitchen.

'Our main obstacle will be Mr Stain – he's been patrolling the corridors even more than usual lately.' Mary trembled as she spoke.

Cos whistled as she pointed at the heading *PLAN IF TORNADO STRIKES DURING CAKE HEIST*. 'Do you think that's likely, Mar?'

Mary raised an eyebrow. 'You can never be too careful, Cos. We have to plan for *every* possibility.'

Cos clapped Mary on the back. 'And you have planned for every almost impossible possibility, Mar. With this plan we can't fail.'

Mary's grin became sure as she packed her clipboard and Pearl's cake forgeries into a large worn leather satchel that she slung across her shoulders.

Cos slunk towards Diya, who raised her eyebrows and folded her arms. Cos knew she'd have to pull out all the stops to persuade Diya that her plan was a good one. 'How's your latest invention coming along?'

Diya's face lit up like Mr Edison's electric light bulbs. She rolled forward, fetching a brand-new contraption from under

her desk. With a flourish befitting a famous stage star, Diya presented her invention to the others. Cos could see that her friend had used chains (pinched from a failed velocipede venture the Stains had bought into), an old bellows (used to help those with chest issues breathe more freely) and a hand crank (chucked out by Miss Stain after her phonograph broke).

At first glance it looked like an ordinary, if very short, wooden ladder – small enough for any one of them to tuck under their arm. But as Cos peered closer, she noticed that the penultimate rung of the ladder was connected to a handle. Diya proudly placed the ladder upright on the floor and Pearl helped to steady it. Diya began winding the handle round and round. With every spin the ladder extended, shooting up towards the cobweb-covered rafters of the room. Even the girls who'd ignored Cos and continued picking apart rope paused to admire Diya's ladder.

Cos clapped her hands together. 'Brilliant. It's just what we need.'

Ambition flickered in Diya's brown eyes, a half-grin creeping across her face. 'I suppose it would be good to see the Phenomenal Protractible Ladder in action, to test if it really works in practice.' She hesitated suddenly, her eyes narrowing at Cos. 'But can you promise us Miss Stain won't catch us? I can't face having my ma's visit cancelled again.'

At the mention of the Stains' habit of scrapping family

visitations, three things happened:

Mary turned a shade of off-white that reminded Cos of the gruel they'd had for breakfast. The last letter Mary had received from her grandpa had mentioned that the workhouse had decided he was fit to work, and she'd spent a week fretting about his health.

Pearl hugged herself close, smearing the ink insects upon her arm into swirls of darkness that contrasted against her pale skin. Cos knew she was desperate to see whether her little sister had grown any taller since she'd seen her last.

Diya sniffed up her sadness. Her dad was away at sea, and she hadn't heard from him in months.

A sliver of sadness crept up Cos's back. Whispers travelled through the schoolroom and the other girls refused to meet her gaze. Cos, unlike her friends, had no family to speak of. She'd been at the home for as long as she could remember, and no one had ever visited her. She'd watched girls older than her age get out, sent away to work back-breaking jobs or live in adult homes the moment they became teenagers. Cos only had a year or two to unravel the truth of her past and find a proper home. Tucked away in the corner of her brain was the memory of a blurry smile, but Cos couldn't place it . . . *yet*. But every escapade out of the dormitory or the schoolroom gave her the chance to find some scrap of information that might lead her to her family.

Diya Nayak

Mary Turner

Pearl Wilson

Cosima . . . Unfortunate.

The others all belonged, even if they were separated from their families, but Cos had no one. On the rare occasions the authorities visited the home, no-surname Cos was always referred to as 'Cosima Unfortunate' – a nickname that felt like a stinging slap.

Cos shook her sadness off as she refocused on the plan at hand. As she did so, her hopelessness melted away.

'This one will work, I *promise* you. And we'll bring back cakes for everyone.' Smiles crossed the hunger-panged faces of all the girls. Some nodded gratefully at Cos, a few hunched shoulders relaxed, and murmurs of excited conversation echoed in the schoolroom.

The girls gathered closer to Cos.

'Here's the plan . . . !