

The trouble with grown-ups is that they always think they're right – about bedtimes and vegetables mostly, but also about beginnings. And, in particular, about the beginnings of our world. They have all sorts of ideas about big bangs and black holes, but if they had come across the Unmapped Kingdoms (which they wouldn't have because secret kingdoms are notoriously hard to find), they would have learnt that at the very, very beginning there was just an egg. A rather large one. And out of this egg, a phoenix was born.

On finding itself alone, it wept seven tears, which, as they fell, became our continents and formed the earth as you and I know it, although to the phoenix all this was simply known as the Faraway. But these lands were dark and empty, so, many years later, the phoenix scattered four of its golden feathers, and out of these grew secret – unmapped – kingdoms, invisible to the people who would go on to live in the Faraway, but holding the magic needed to conjure sunlight, rain and snow, and every untold wonder behind

the weather, from the music of a sunrise to the stories of a snowstorm.

Now the phoenix, being the wisest of all magical creatures, knew that if used selfishly, magic grows strange and dark, but if it is used for the greater good it can nourish an entire world and keep it turning. So the phoenix decreed that those who lived in the Unmapped Kingdoms could enjoy all the wonders that its magic brought, but only if they, in turn, worked to send some of this magic out into the Faraway so that the continents there might be filled with light and life. If the Unmappers ever stopped sharing their magic, the phoenix warned, both the Faraway and the Unmapped Kingdoms would crumble to nothing.

The phoenix placed the Lofty Husks in charge of each Unmapped Kingdom – wizards born under the same eclipse and marked out from the other Unmappers on account of their wisdom, unusually long life expectancy and terrible jokes – and, although in each kingdom the Lofty Husks took a different form, they ruled fairly, ensuring that every day the magic of the phoenix was passed on to the Faraway.

The four kingdoms all played different roles. Unmappers in Rumblestar collected marvels – droplets of sunlight, rain and snow in their purest form – which dragons transported to the other kingdoms so the inhabitants there could mix them with magical ink to create weather scrolls for the Faraway: sun symphonies in Crackledawn, rain paintings in Jungledrop and snow stories in Silvercrag. Little by little, the Faraway lands came alive: plants, flowers and trees sprang

up, and so strong was the magic that eventually animals appeared and, finally, people.

Years passed and the phoenix looked on from Everdark, a place so far away and out of reach that not even the Unmappers knew where it lay. But a phoenix cannot live for ever. And so, after five hundred years, the first phoenix died and, as is the way with such birds, a new phoenix rose from its ashes to renew the magic in the Unmapped Kingdoms and ensure it was shared with those in the Faraway.

Time went by and the Unmappers grew to understand that every five hundred years another era would begin and, as long as the new phoenix showed itself to them on the night of its rising, the magic would be renewed and all would be well. Everyone believed things would continue this way for ever . . .

When you're dealing with magic though, *for ever* is rarely straightforward. There is always someone, somewhere, who becomes greedy. And when a heart is set on stealing magic for personal gain, suddenly ancient decrees and warnings slip quite out of mind. Such was the case with a harpy called Morg who grew jealous of the phoenix and its power.

Seeking to claim the magic of the Unmapped Kingdoms for herself, Morg breathed a curse over the nest of the last phoenix on the very night of the renewal of magic two thousand years ago. The old phoenix burst into flames, like the rest of its kind had done before it, but this time the flames burned black and no new phoenix appeared from the ashes. And so, Morg claimed the nest as her own.

But when things go wrong and magic goes awry, it

makes room for stories with unexpected heroes and unlikely heroines. Which is exactly what happened next . . . That same night, Smudge, a young girl from the kingdom of Crackledawn, was somewhere she ought not to have been, and she saw Morg tear across the sky in the place of the phoenix. With the fate of the Unmapped Kingdoms and the Faraway in her hands, Smudge, together with a monkey called Bartholomew, journeyed to Everdark, a place no Unmapper had been before. And it was there that Smudge tracked down Morg and locked the harpy's wings, the very things that held her power, inside an enchanted tree deep in the forest.

The Unmapped Kingdoms and the Faraway were saved, but without the magic of the phoenix, the Lofty Husks in each kingdom had to set about searching for a way to preserve what was left of the old magic until the harpy died, or was killed, and a new phoenix rose from Everdark. The answer, as it happened, lay with the dragons that roamed the skies and the seas. Never before had these beasts heeded the call of the Lofty Husks – for they were wilder than the rest of the magical creatures – but they could sense the threat to the Unmapped Kingdoms and the Faraway, so they promised to scatter their sacred moondust every night, and though it didn't grant as much magic as before, it was enough to keep things turning.

And that could well have been that until Morg died and a new phoenix rose. Except it wasn't. Because when a harpy is set on evil, she doesn't just slope away and give up. She

plots and she plots and she plots until before you know it, she has hatched a new plan to steal the magic of the Unmapped Kingdoms . . .

But I am getting ahead of myself, and a certain eleven-year-old boy from the Faraway wouldn't approve at all. At least, Casper Tock wouldn't have approved *before* the Extremely Unpredictable Event happened, because up until then he very much lived his life according to his to-do lists and timetables. Admittedly, the lists often only included one item – grow up quickly – but his timetables were much more detailed, from the five minutes he allowed himself before breakfast each morning to straighten the pictures on his bedroom walls to the half hour he spent before going to sleep every night refolding all of his clothes.

Casper liked to keep a tidy bedroom, an organised mind and a tight schedule. That way, fewer things went wrong and there was less chance – or so he thought – of wandering into the clutches of school bullies Candida Cashmere-Jumps and Leopold Splattercash.

But no matter how many lists you write and no matter how many timetables you create, you cannot be responsible for your parents. They forget keys, lose handbags, misplace spectacles and drop phones down the loo. In fact, once you reach the grand old age of eleven, you can start to realise that your parents are hopelessly out of control.

Such was the case with Casper's parents, Ernie and Ariella Tock. They had been out of hand for quite some time and they were, in fact, largely to blame for everything that

happened to Casper that dreary afternoon in March. Because if Ernie had come home on time that day and if Ariella had remembered her handbag, then perhaps the Extremely Unpredictable Event might never have happened at all.

But sometimes it is when people are late and handbags are forgotten that magic begins to unfold . . .

Chapter 1

Casper crouched inside the Lost Property basket in the corridor outside his classroom. The school timetable stated, very firmly, that he should be in Mr Barge's geography lesson, but his own timetable, which was, at this second, folded neatly into his palm, stated that he should be exactly where he was – surrounded by dirty blazers and smelly sports kit.

Casper shifted his weight. Thirty minutes was a long time to be wedged inside a wicker basket, but it had become an important part of his Thursday afternoons. Because only by telling Mr Barge that he had a piano lesson or a dentist appointment or an errand to run for the headmaster, and hiding in Lost Property instead, could Casper overhear the lesson *and* the homework instructions (thereby not falling behind in his studies or causing Mr Barge to question his absences) whilst avoiding crossing paths with Candida and Leopold.

By and large, Little Wallops Boarding School was a friendly place – and with its wood-panelled dining room, enormous

fireplaces and stone gargoyles it was rather beautiful, too – but in every school there are rotten eggs, the sort of children who write complaint letters to Father Christmas and ask their parents for a pocket-money raise. Candida and Leopold were two such children, and while Casper had previously managed to avoid both of them because they were in different classes, this term Candida and Leopold's geography teacher had been off sick so Casper's personal timetable had needed some considerable adjustments.

Casper risked a peep over the top of the basket. Mr Barge always left his classroom door open (apparently it made hurling pupils out of lessons far more straightforward), and though from where he crouched Casper couldn't see Candida or Leopold, or any of his classmates for that matter, he had a clear view of his teacher, who was, at this moment, flinging exercise books towards his pupils.

'Down the centre, Ben – quick, catch! On the wing, Ruby – look sharp!'

Mr Barge, a middle-aged man the size and shape of a drawbridge, doubled up as a geography teacher *and* a rugby coach and he often got the two confused.

Another exercise book shot, like a rugby ball, across the room, and Mr Barge's voice boomed through the door and out into the corridor.

'Coming through, Oliver! You'll have to jump for this one!'

A short, sharp thump followed. Casper winced. He guessed Oliver had tried to jump for his book – and missed.

Mr Barge performed several lunges which made his suit

squeak at the seams, then he threw his class a toothy grin. 'Hustle in, Year Six. Hustle in.'

There were a few nervous scrapes as the pupils pulled their chairs closer.

'We've all seen the newspaper headlines these past few weeks: what the nation thought was a one-off hurricane in England at the beginning of March has now escalated into a worldwide weather crisis. The hurricanes across Europe are becoming more frequent – the United Kingdom has been ravaged by gale-force winds four times in the last week alone – and –' he paused '– more deadly.'

Casper shivered. He'd seen the news that morning. The hurricane on Monday had been confirmed as the worst yet. Thousands of people had lost their homes where it struck in London and hundreds of casualties had been reported. And all that had happened *despite* the warning sirens recently wired up inside buildings across the country – because the hurricanes came fast, faster often than the time it took the Met Office to trigger the sirens when the winds looked like they were picking up.

The hurricanes had been coming every few days for the last month, and they had flattened Little Wallops' cricket pavilion, ripped slates off the school roof, shattered windows and left several sixth formers with broken limbs when the door to the sports hall had been wrenched off its hinges and launched across the gym. Corridors were lined with buckets catching leaks and windows had been barred with planks of wood. But Little Wallops was still standing – just – and so

far, there had been no fatalities. Everyone knew that could change though; they were living each day on a knife edge. An underground bunker was being dug to provide more shelter, but that would take time and even when it was ready, would the sirens give everyone enough warning to reach it?

‘And that’s not to mention what’s happening further afield,’ Mr Barge went on. ‘Multiple tornados are rampaging across America, whirlwinds are tearing up Africa and typhoons are smashing through Asia and Australia. Meteorologists agree that climate change could be a key factor behind the recent weather disruption – we know global warming has hit critical levels in the past year – but that still wouldn’t explain the haphazard pattern of these storms. Hurricanes normally come in from the oceans and hit coastal regions but these ones are striking up left, right and centre, defying any recognisable weather behaviour, which is why it’s so hard to predict their nature. But our meteorologists are determined to get to the bottom of it all. And, as geographers, I feel that we should do the same, particularly since the school holidays this Easter have been postponed due to continued road and rail closures and we’ll all be staying here until the lockdown is over and it’s safe enough for your parents to collect you.’

Casper could hear a few of the pupils nearest the door sniffing back tears. They knew that leaving Little Wallops before the all-clear for resumed travel would be foolish, and that arguing with a man the size and shape of a drawbridge would be pointless, but that didn’t stop them missing their families. Casper felt suddenly relieved that he and his parents

had been offered free accommodation in the school, as well as a bursary place for Casper, because his parents both taught at Little Wallops – at least it meant they were all together now.

Mr Barge pretended not to notice all the sniffing; he found crying children deeply unsettling. ‘Your extra homework task is to pick one of the disasters reported this week and produce a case file on it. Think what, where, when, who and – the biggest question – *why*? Climate change will come into it, of course, but are there other reasons for the strange behaviour of these storms?’ Mr Barge rolled up his sleeves. ‘I’ll expect your reports on Monday and I want you to tackle this homework in the same way the mighty Shane Hogarth of the Wallop Wanderers tackled six of his opponents at once in the Rugby Sevens Finals last year.’ He paused. ‘Really look your homework in the eye and give it what for.’

There was a confused sort of silence.

Casper craned his neck a little further out of the basket and saw his classmate Sophie raise a timid hand. Sophie was the closest thing Casper had to a friend – they sat together at lunch and sometimes paired up for science projects – but Casper made sure conversations focused strictly on schoolwork. Because friendships, and all the complicated emotions and unpredictable feelings that came with them, had proved to be nothing other than disastrous for Casper in the past.

When he first started at Little Wallops, back in Year One, he had tried to make friends, but even then Candida and

Leopold had singled him out as being different. They had teased and taunted Casper and every time he had tried to make a friend they'd somehow ruined things – until, finally, Casper decided that he'd had enough. Making friends was painful and messy and frightening, and despite his parents' best efforts to encourage him to try again, Casper decided it was just not worth the trouble. Life was a good deal simpler, and safer, without the trauma of tackling friendships. And so, little by little, Casper's world had shrunk until the very idea of taking risks, trying new things or even momentarily veering off timetable made him feel quite queasy.

Casper watched now as Sophie plucked up courage to ask her question. 'S . . . sir, I'm holding a cake sale in the gym on Sunday to raise money for those who have lost their homes because of the hurricanes and I still have to make a few more flyers. Please can I have an extension on the homework?'

Mr Barge flexed his biceps. 'Did the mighty Shane Hogarth ask for an extension when the Roaring Rovers were closing in at half-time?'

Sophie frowned. 'Um, probably not, sir?'

'Then you have my answer.' At that, Mr Barge muttered something about a class scrum to finish the day off, but thankfully for his pupils, the bell rang instead. Casper's heart quickened. He had a matter of seconds to scramble out of the Lost Property basket, blend into the stream of pupils pouring out of their classrooms and rushing along the corridor, then leg it across the library to the door that led up to the turret he and his parents lived in.

A tide of children advanced towards him and, clutching his timetable to his chest, Casper clambered out of the basket and joined the throng. He was small for his age, and slight, which helped with ducking, weaving and scuttling by unnoticed. Down the corridor he sped, beneath the newly fitted sirens and past the buckets catching leaks – then, when everyone else peeled off towards their after-school clubs, Casper turned into the library.

If he had been a different sort of child he might have paused to dilly-dally between the shelves and leaf through the books, but Casper wasn't one for detours. Especially when the librarian, Mrs Whereabouts, was taking a coffee break in the staffroom, which meant there wouldn't be adult supervision in the library should Candida and Leopold appear. Casper nipped between the first few bookshelves, sidestepping the fallen plasterwork from a recent storm, then burst out into the aisle that ran the length of the library.

After a few strides he noticed the smell: the unmistakable tang of hairspray. Casper's chest thumped. Candida Cashmere-Jumps was in the library. There was a piggish snort from somewhere nearby and Casper's toes curled inside his shoes. Leopold Splattercash was in here, too.

But that's impossible, Casper thought. *I followed my timetable exactly; Candida and Leopold couldn't possibly have made it to the library before me – I left the Lost Property basket the moment the bell rang!* He gulped. *Unless they skived Mr Barge's geography lesson, too, and got a head start on me . . .*

Casper flung himself into a run but as he did so, a girl and

a boy slid out from a bookcase several metres in front.

Casper stopped in his tracks.

Candida was tall, thin and terribly vain. She only ever smiled when looking at herself in the mirror and she only ever laughed when other people cried. Leopold, on the other hand, was small, round and terribly stupid. If asked to recite the two times table he broke out in a light sweat and he still couldn't spell his own name. He and Candida had one thing in common though: money.

Candida's father had set up a luxury cashmere clothing range which was sold in every department store in the world, while Leopold's ancestors had done something very suspicious and *very* profitable with an ostrich egg and a diamond in the eighteenth century. But when money is the glue that holds a friendship together, the results are often deeply unpleasant.

Candida twisted her long blonde hair around her finger. 'You weren't the only one skiving geography, Casper.'

'Yeah.' Leopold sniggered, before stating something that was now blindingly obvious: 'We skived, too.'

Casper eyed the oak door leading up to his flat at the far end of the library. If he made a dash for it now he might just make it. But Candida had other ideas.

'Going somewhere?' she sneered, and then she closed five perfectly manicured nails around Casper's arm. 'Because I was so looking forward to spending time with you this weekend now the holidays have been delayed.'

'H . . . home,' Casper stammered. 'Just home.'

Candida frowned. 'But that turret's not really *home* now, is it, Casper?'

Leopold smirked and his double chin spread out like a greasy balloon.

'You don't belong here,' Candida hissed, plucking at Casper's second-hand blazer then turning her lip up at his charity-shop rucksack. 'The pupils at Little Wallops are from well-connected families. We're refined. Special. *Rich*.' She paused and her next sentence dripped out like oil. 'We have class.'

'Yeah. Class.' Leopold only knew about forty-five words so more often than not he just repeated Candida's.

Casper thought of his mother, adopted into an English family from a Tanzanian orphanage, and his father, brought up on one of the roughest council estates in London. Together they had made their way in the world. Ariella was a PE teacher at Little Wallops and she also ran lunchtime yoga clubs (frequently attended by pupils who had geography with Mr Barge) and Ernie taught Design and Technology (he could carve stools, build tables, make lamps and fix almost anything that came his way).

But none of that mattered to Candida and Leopold. For them, growing up on an estate didn't mean high-rise flats and graffiti walls; it meant peacocks, walled gardens and butlers called Cuthbert. And though Casper rarely yearned for friends, in situations like this he did. Badly. Because there was a tiny and very private corner of Casper's heart that was bruised and lonely.

‘Trouble is, Casper, you don’t fit in here. You’re not the right colour *or* class.’

Casper felt his muscles stiffen at the unfairness of it all, but as Candida tightened her grip on his arm he knew he didn’t have the guts to stand up to her. Candida and Leopold were unpleasant to most people in Little Wallops, because nasty people just can’t help themselves, but they were particularly dreadful to Casper because *everything* about him was different from them – and they didn’t like it one bit. Candida narrowed her eyes at Casper’s tight black curls and dark skin. ‘What do we do with misfits, Leopold?’

Leopold looked blank. It was the end of the day and he was running dangerously low on words. ‘Bin,’ he said after a while.

Casper glanced at the bin in the corner of the room. It would hurt being dunked head first into it but perhaps it wouldn’t be as bad as when Leopold had sat on him during break, causing Casper to lose the feeling in his legs for a week, or the time Candida had burned his English homework and Casper had been put in detention on his birthday for failing to hand it in. But today, fate was on his side.

‘Candida and Leopold!’ came an old woman’s voice from the doorway.

Casper looked up to see Mrs Whereabouts walking into the room. She was a strange-looking librarian – she had spiky grey hair, a nose ring and she *always* wore a polo neck, even in the height of summer – but stranger than all of that was her accent. It was impossible to place it and when anyone asked Mrs Whereabouts where she was from, she simply

waved her hand and said: 'Here and there.' But Casper had noticed that she often turned up at just the right time, and now was no exception.

'I hear from Mr Barge that neither of you attended his lesson this afternoon,' she said as she drew close to the group.

Candida dropped Casper's arm, then slowly, disdainfully, she turned to face Mrs Whereabouts. The librarian didn't seem to belong to an obvious class, so to be safe Candida treated her the same way she treated most of her teachers – with a casual indifference – but she was careful not to overstep the mark because more time in detention meant there was less time to be horrid to other people.

'I was seeing the nurse.' Candida gave a half-hearted cough and Mrs Whereabouts raised a silver eyebrow.

'Casper, I hear, was in a piano lesson,' Mrs Whereabouts continued, and Casper winced at the lie he had fed Mr Barge. 'But you, Leopold?'

Leopold picked up a book from the shelf next to him. 'I was –' he paused '– reading.'

Mrs Whereabouts blinked. 'Oh, really? About what?'

Leopold looked at the thesaurus he was holding and made a wild guess. 'Theesysauruses. They're a type of dinosaur.'

Candida rolled her eyes, then Mrs Whereabouts lifted the book from Leopold's hands and, very calmly, delivered a detention. 'Please report to the headmaster's office immediately. Tell him that you have no idea what a thesaurus is but you would very much like to copy out every single word inside one.'

Then Leopold did what he always did when words finally failed him: he reached into his pocket. ‘Couldn’t we just settle this with a nice crisp fiver?’

Mrs Whereabouts was about to reply when there was a bellow from the doorway.

‘DID THE MIGHTY SHANE HOGARTH THROW MONEY AT THE ROARING ROVERS WHEN HE WANTED TO SCORE A TRY?’ Mr Barge exploded as he marched towards Leopold.

Casper still hadn’t a clue who the mighty Shane Hogarth was (no matter how many times Mr Barge mentioned him), but right now he loved him. Because suddenly, unexpectedly, there was a chance to run. And run Casper did. He tore down the length of the library – unaware that Candida was watching him like a hawk – and flung open the turret door. Then he closed it firmly behind him and for a moment or two he just stood there, panting into the quiet. With a sigh of relief, he climbed the cold stone steps to his flat.

The turret Casper’s family lived in only had four rooms: a sitting room – with a sagging sofa, a threadbare rug, a broken grandfather clock his dad had promised the headmaster he’d fix and a television that was far too old and small to be considered cool – a poky kitchen and two tiny bedrooms. There was another turret next door, which belonged to Mrs Whereabouts and her cat, but Casper had only been over there once to borrow milk when they first moved in.

Casper placed his school bag neatly by the door before taking off his shoes and tucking them, at right angles,

beneath the sofa. Then he pressed LISTEN on the answer machine. It was a message from his mum saying that she had forgotten her handbag in the village shop – again – but he mustn't worry because she would be home in half an hour. Casper looked out of the window and bit his lip. It was a drizzly afternoon, and the leaves on the trees left upright after the storms were still, but Casper knew that the sirens could sound unexpectedly on windless afternoons because, many miles away, the Met Office had picked up the stirrings of yet another storm.

After the first hurricane hit the country at the beginning of the month, the headmaster had done a headcount in the hall and when he had confirmed that everyone was safe, a ripple of excitement had spread through the school. Pupils had whispered about lessons being cancelled and term ending three weeks early while the groundsmen rebuilt the stonework and cleared away the fallen trees. But then the hurricanes had kept coming, roads had closed, train lines had been ripped apart and the reports of fatalities had started. That was when the headmaster had told every year group that they must remain in school grounds at all times for their own safety. Teachers were allowed to leave if they wished, and it was possible to get to the local village, if you were prepared to clamber over toppled trees and edge past ruined buildings, but otherwise everyone was stuck where they were for the foreseeable future while the weather continued to behave in such an unpredictable manner.

Casper hated that his parents often volunteered to go to

the village to stock up on what few supplies had made their way to the shop. What if there was another hurricane when his mum was walking home today? Casper tried not to think about it and instead consulted his timetable, then his watch. His dad was late back, too. He had probably lost the keys to lock up his Design and Technology workshop – again – or was helping the groundsmen dig the underground bunker.

Casper decided he would allow himself a glass of juice to steady his nerves before embarking on a new to-do list – an activity that provided him with a satisfying sense of calm and control. But as he was crossing the sitting room he heard the unmistakable creak of an old door opening. Casper tensed. His mum wasn't due back for another half hour, it couldn't be his dad – he always whistled his way up the stairs – and it was hardly likely to be another teacher because they knocked before coming up. But this person had entered quietly, sneakily, as if they didn't want anyone else to know they were there.

Casper swallowed.

For the first time in the six years he had been living at Little Wallops Boarding School, somebody had followed him into the turret.

Chapter 2

Casper stayed very still for several seconds. Perhaps whoever it was had made a mistake and would just clear off. But there were footsteps now and they were climbing the stairs.

‘Urgh. Even the staircase stinks of his mother’s weird cooking.’

Casper flinched. It was Candida; clearly she hadn’t finished with him yet.

‘I wish she didn’t insist on cooking African food,’ she tutted. ‘Doesn’t she know that over here we eat cucumber sandwiches and custard creams?’

Casper wished that he was brave enough to stand up for his mum, but he was too frightened, so he made a mental list of his hiding options instead.

1. Kitchen cupboard: not big enough.
2. Under his bed: too obvious.
3. Beneath his parents’ bed: too messy.
4. Behind the sofa: really?

And then his eyes rested on the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. Casper had seen his dad open it up the night before – there was something wrong with the pendulum and both clock hands were stuck at twelve, he'd said – but a dodgy pendulum was the least of Casper's problems. He charged towards the clock, yanking the door open using the key slotted into the lock, then he snatched the key out and bundled himself inside.

It was dark within and it smelt of dust and secrets.

'Casper?'

Casper held his breath.

'I know you're in this poky little turret,' Candida cooed as she tiptoed over the carpet. 'And I know for a fact that your parents aren't. I saw your mother walking down the drive earlier and the lights are still on in your father's workshop.' She paused. 'And there I was assuming your door was always locked ...'

Casper's heart beat in double time as he listened to Candida stalking through the flat. Cupboard doors opened and snapped shut in the kitchen, then Casper watched, through the narrowest crack in the clock door, as Candida returned to the sitting room and dug her nails into the back of the sofa.

'You think I'd let you get away with dumping Leopold in detention?' she hissed. 'Do you have any idea how wealthy his family is? His father's so rich he can make people disappear with just one telephone call.' She lowered her voice. 'Your parents would never find you; you'd just wake up one day in

Greenland or somewhere equally ghastly and that would jolly well be that.’

Casper grimaced at the thought of such a drastic change to his timetable and tried to ignore the pendulum digging into his shoulder. Then his eyes widened. Candida was right outside the clock now. She looked it up and down, as if regarding a pile of dirty laundry, and Casper didn’t dare blink. Then she flounced from the sitting room into Casper’s bedroom.

Such was the way that Candida moved though – dramatically, impatiently, like a spoilt little monarch – that in her wake a small gust of air slipped through the crack in the grandfather clock. The dust around Casper shifted and seemed to glitter in the half-light and it was then – in that hushed moment – that the Extremely Unpredictable Event occurred.

The key Casper was holding now looked altogether different. Without the layer of dust covering it, he could see that it was not simply a dull lump of metal any more. It was silver and in its base there was a turquoise gem, which was glowing. And it was because of this glow that Casper saw he was not alone inside the clock.

There, sitting opposite him, was a girl holding a small white envelope, out of which she was pulling a note. The girl looked up and, upon seeing Casper, jumped before hastily shoving the note into her pocket and glaring at him.

Casper blinked. Then he blinked again and rubbed his eyes. But the girl was very much still there and she

was unlike anyone he had ever seen before. She had tiny gold stars scattered over her cheekbones, she was wearing dungarees with several spanners and screwdrivers poking out of the front pocket and, most disconcerting of all, she smelt strongly of The Outdoors, a place Casper tried, at all costs, to avoid because of the wide-open spaces and the lack of Lost Property baskets, which made hiding from particular classmates very tricky.

The girl cracked her knuckles and Casper flinched. Was she a burglar? Or an accomplice of Candida's? But what kind of burglar or accomplice dressed like this? And had she crept inside the turret after lessons or had she been sneaking around up here all day? Casper tried to gather his thoughts. *The clock isn't big enough for two people to hide in and the girl was definitely not here when I climbed inside because I would've sensed her or bumped into her, despite the dark. Wouldn't I?*

But as Casper stared ahead in disbelief he couldn't help feeling that the inside of the clock looked somehow bigger now. Roomier. More like a cupboard, perhaps, or an old closet.

The girl narrowed her eyes, like a cat might do before pouncing, and Casper shrank inside his blazer. Was it safer in the clock with this odd girl or outside in the flat with Candida? He couldn't decide. So he did what most people in England do when they find themselves in an awkward situation: nothing.

It was the girl who spoke first. 'So, you're the criminal.'

Casper paled. If Candida overheard the girl talking, he'd be toast. So, he closed his eyes and tried to pretend that what

was happening wasn't. Because it couldn't be. Pendulums and hanging weights were what you found behind grandfather clock doors. Not strange girls in dungarees.

A finger prodded him in his ribcage and Casper's eyes sprang open. The girl was dangerously close now and the gold on her cheeks glistened. She shuffled backward again, pushed her hair – which was white-blonde and wild about her face as if she'd been shoved into a tumble dryer and pulled out mid-spin – back from her eyes, and glowered at Casper.

'I'd appreciate it if you didn't fall asleep mid-arrest. That's what dungeons are for.'

Casper raised a shaking finger to his lips in an attempt to make the girl be quiet. Surely at any moment Candida would fling open the grandfather clock door if she heard the sound of a voice inside it? But nothing happened. Perhaps Candida was still rooting through his bedroom. He tried to think rationally. The girl inside the clock must be a pupil at Little Wallops – someone younger than him, someone extremely forgettable – and yet looking at her now Casper couldn't help feeling that he'd remember someone like her.

'I . . . I don't recognise you from school,' he whispered.

The girl wiggled her feet, which were bare and scuffed with dirt. 'That's coz I'm usually too busy getting expelled from classes.' She paused. 'But they always let me back in, in the end. There's a shortage of Bottlers in Rumblestar right now so it's important I get a decent training.' She frowned. 'Stop distracting me. I'm trying to arrest you.'

Casper felt sure that Candida would find him now – this

girl was hardly making an effort to be quiet – but for some strange reason she didn't appear and Casper found himself whispering a question. 'Where on earth did you come from then?'

'The sky,' the girl replied. 'Obviously.'

'The sky doesn't spit out children,' Casper hissed. 'That would be ridiculous.'

The girl shivered. 'You sound just like a grown-up.'

Casper thought of Candida again. Was she rummaging through the kitchen cupboards now or had she given up and left the turret? 'I don't know who you are or where you're from,' Casper whispered to the girl inside the clock, 'but I'm *not* a criminal – *you* are for trespassing onto private property! I'm just a Year Six boy hiding in a grandfather clock, and right now we need to keep quiet.'

The girl snorted. 'I'm only ever quiet when I'm sleeping, and even then I'm pretty sure I snore.' She looked around. 'Besides, you're inside a Neverlate Tree, not a clock. You really are a very stupid criminal not to know where you're hiding! And not even bothering to disguise your face or your clothes to even *try* to look a tiny bit more like one of us!'

Casper was losing patience now. 'If this is a tree then why is there a pendulum digging into my shoulder?'

The girl looked faintly amused. 'There's not. But the Neverlate Tree is a bit wonky inside so I wouldn't be surprised if you're leaning against a crooked piece of wood.'

Casper twisted his head round and his palms trickled with sweat. Where the pendulum had undoubtedly been there

was now a gnarled wooden bump. And mingling with the smell of dust and secrets was the warm, wild smell of a tree. Casper swallowed. The situation was getting dangerously out of control. What *was* going on?

The girl folded her arms. 'The Neverlate Tree grows excuses for those heading back to the castle late but the envelopes only open if you climb inside to read them.' She snatched the note from her pocket and held it up so that Casper could see:

Busy capturing criminal

Now, had she been a little less hasty and a little more thorough the girl might have turned the piece of paper over and seen the words on the other side. But she was not that sort of girl; she moved fast, talked lots and thought very little about the consequences.

'So,' she said, 'I'm going to drag you up the steps by your ears or your hair or whichever hurts more, then the Lofty Husks will punish you for tampering with the kingdom's marvels and –' she grinned '– reward *me* for being the hero to bring you in!'

Casper's eyes bulged – not at her words, though they made no sense at all – but at the lump wriggling past the spanners and the screwdrivers in the pocket on the front of the girl's dungarees. A blue-scaled, winged creature about the size of a fist poked its snout over the edge of the pocket and squinted at Casper.

The girl rapped the creature on the head. ‘Not now, Arlo. I’m extremely busy.’

The miniature dragon – for that, to Casper’s amazement, seemed to be what it was – let out a bored growl, then slunk back into the pocket.

The girl rubbed her hands together. ‘Now, where were we?’

Casper’s pulse was racing. Dungarees, dungeons and now dragons called Arlo . . . He needed to put a stop to all this now, so he rammed his shoulder into the door. It didn’t budge. He tried again, this time with his foot, but still the door wouldn’t move.

The girl sniggered. ‘Neverlate Trees only open again for you if you’re holding an excuse.’ She wiggled the note in the air. ‘Everyone knows that.’

Casper ignored her and pummelled at the door with his fists. ‘Er, Candida? If you’re still out there, and now is a good time for you, I’d love to take that beating.’

‘I don’t mind doing the beating myself,’ the girl in the clock said hopefully.

Casper flung himself at the door but still it held fast. And then the girl pushed the door gently, and to Casper’s surprise and relief, it swung open. Light flooded in, drowning the turquoise glow, but as Casper scrambled out of the clock after the girl he was surprised to find that his feet did not meet with carpet. They met with something cold and hard.

Stone.

Casper looked up and his stomach lurched. His sitting room was gone. Candida was gone. The grandfather clock was gone. In its place there stood a very old tree. And hanging from the twisted branches were – Casper gasped – not buds, not leaves, but dozens of small white envelopes.