



Chapter One



THE BEGINNING OF THE MAGIC



It was freezing and frosty, that January night. The sky was slate-black and sprinkled with stars. A milky moon hung from the heavens, stroking the sleeping hills and the snow-covered land. A cloud in the shape of a cow drifted towards the full moon, then seemed to jump over it. At the same time a comet shot overhead, and it began to snow.

It wasn't ordinary snow, though. This stuff was more silver than white and it glowed. Down it tumbled, buffeted by the winter wind. It landed on the crusted ground and disappeared.

Any animal close enough to see would have noticed how the silver flakes hit the frozen earth and slid quickly into it, and then how the icy soil pulsed with light – like a blanket with a torch underneath, switching on and off, on then off.

More of the powdery droplets fell, for miles around and further afield, in counties and countries beyond, in places where it was

raining and others where it was dry. The glowing stuff fell north, south, east and west. But few seeing the falling silver would have known this.

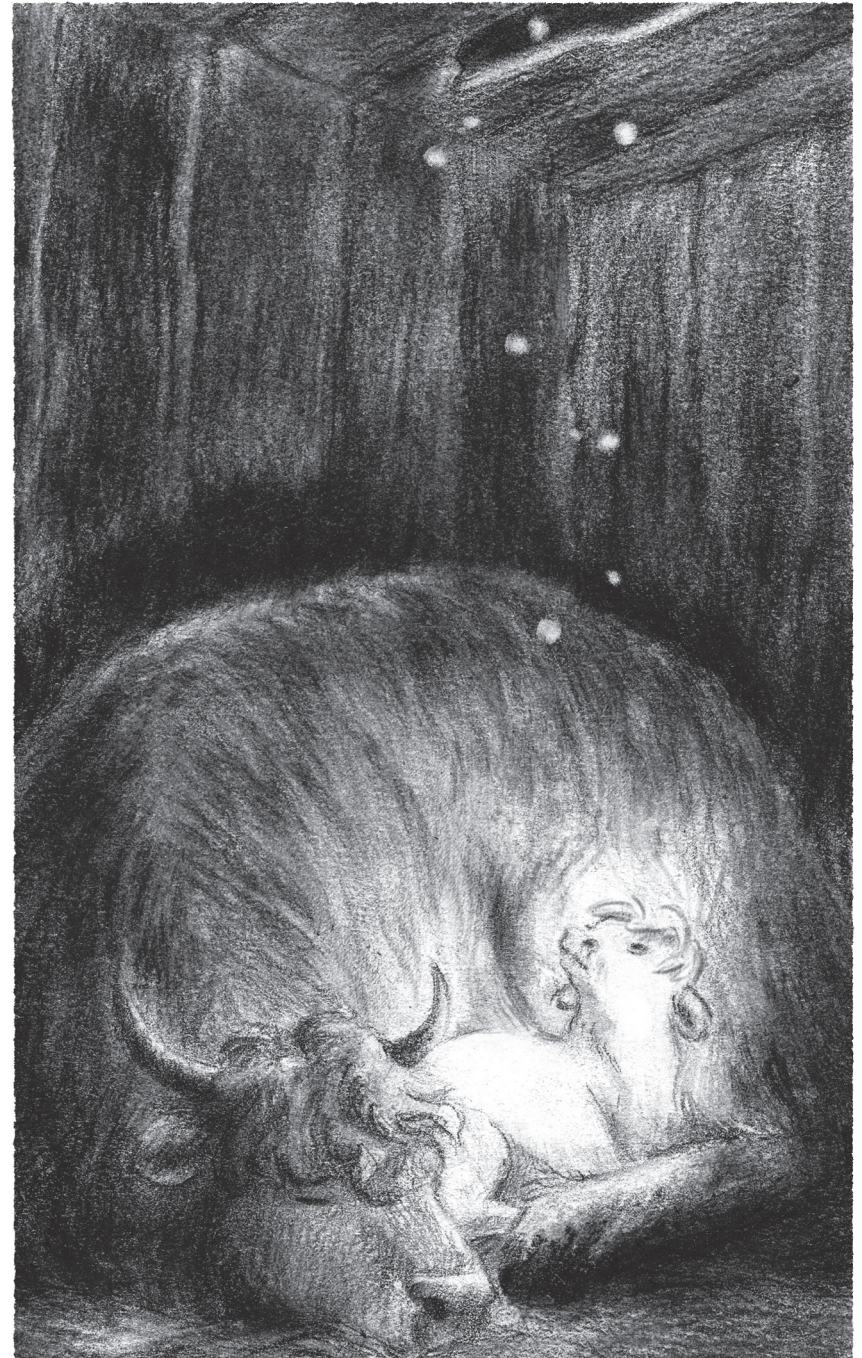
Some of it floated down through a crack in a barn roof, drifting through cold air to land on a small white calf who lay curled up beside his sleeping mother. He shivered, tickled by the bright bits as they touched him. His eyes fluttered but didn't open, so he didn't see his fur shine and glow before dulling to plain white again. He snuggled into himself and breathed a contented sigh.

Eleven wide hills away, a twelve-year-old boy lay asleep in his bed, his red hair feathered across his pillow. In his hand was a bird. Not a toy one, a real one, and a dead one at that; a stuffed white dove. His window was open and a silver flake drifted in. As though searching, it floated about and hovered over the boy. Dropping down, it settled on his forehead. Its kiss of light twinkled there, then coursed into him. For a moment his red hair flickered with a fiery light.

A few hours later, the sun rose. It warmed and thawed the fields. And here and there where the silver snow had fallen, white milk mushrooms began to sprout.



Rufus Chumley crouched in the grass beside a fire that he'd made. Warmed by its heat, he felt drowsy. He gazed at the trunks of the trees in the woods nearby. He blew at the hot embers of his fire's burning logs and their flames grew, licking the underside of a



chicken that was cooking on a spit – his breakfast. He'd meant to shoot a rabbit but as usual, they'd all been too fast for him. So, to make up for it, he'd stolen the chicken from his parents' fridge. Its flesh glistened and spat hot fat.

'Ten minutes and you'll be done,' he told it.

He picked up his air rifle and put it to his shoulder. He twisted as he swept it from left to right, looking for something to take a pot shot at. He spotted some fat white mushrooms under an oak. He aimed and pulled the trigger. *BANG*. The flesh of the mushrooms splattered on the tree's trunk.

'Shot!' Chumley congratulated himself.

'RUFUS!' A screeching, more like a car's brake than a human voice, came from the house. Rufus turned. 'Don't you *dare!*' his mother shouted. 'Don't you point that thing at me, you idiot!'

Rufus dropped his gun. He wished he had his pea shooter with him. He would have loved to shoot a hard pea at his mother, to clip her earlobe and make her diamond earrings jangle. Or to hit her neck. That would sting. Or to hit one of her soft, ring-encrusted hands. She'd go mad. He could imagine her screaming and hopping about. And how satisfying that would be. He watched her as she tottered over the grass towards him, the stiletto heels of her sparkly shoes sinking in the mud. She was dressed up as lavishly as someone at a Hollywood party. In her hand was a tulip-shaped cocktail glass with clear liquid and an olive in it. He wondered why she was coming to talk to him. She usually avoided him.

'I've told you before. Fires here blow smoke into the kitchen,' she complained. Her dark-ringed eyes darted around as they absorbed the sight in front of her. 'Is that blood on your hands?'

Chumley looked at his fingers. 'Yes. Had to get the giblets out of the chicken.'

His mother grimaced at the mound of chicken innards on the ground. 'Didn't it strike you that you might wash your hands? You're a filthy animal, Rufus Chumley.' She began to cough as a wind caught some of the fire's smoke and blew it in her face. She scowled. 'Like a dirty, feral child.'

'I *am* a child,' her son reminded her.

'Could have fooled me,' she slurred. 'Look at the size of you, you great galumphing upstart. You're not a child.' She wagged her red-nailed finger at him. 'You fit in your father's clothes. Your shoes are the size of a lumberjack's. Don't you lie to me, young man. Now go to work! School.' She hiccupped. 'Wherever it is you go.'

She tripped a little as she made her way back to the house. Rufus Chumley didn't bother to explain to her that there was a staff training day happening at his school, and so he had a day off.

'Your father wants to see you later,' she called back, now remembering what she'd come out to say. 'He's got a job for you.'

Chumley watched her walk towards the ugly grey-brick house that he had to call home. By the time she closed its back door she would have forgotten she'd spoken to him. She seemed to only think about him when he was irritating her. And then, when she communicated, the icing on the conversation was always an insult. Usually telling him how stupid he was. She definitely did not like him. She never had. If he had been smaller, might she have liked him more? he wondered. He looked down at his huge feet and at his long legs, and at his big hands. He looked like a sixteen year old, even though he was only twelve. When he was

born, he'd been regular-sized. But he had soon grown twice the size of other babies. Twice the size! This was because he had a growing condition. His parents had taken him to lots of doctors but no medicine could stop him growing. Now he was huge. His mother, disgusted, had given him to mean nannies to be looked after. Now he was old enough to look after himself, she'd said. And so, he did.

He was hungry. The chicken was done. Chumley took it off the fire and waved the meat on its stick in the cold air to cool it down. It smelt delicious. A pheasant squawked in the wood, as though reminding him that he preferred eating pheasant to chicken. He could live off wild pheasant, he thought. He might have to if he left home. He'd considered leaving home countless times, and, every time his horrible mother reminded him of how little she cared for him, how repulsive she found his largeness, the idea of running away became more attractive.



A church bell sounded eleven o'clock, its chime thrown out across the Salisbury countryside over hilly fields full of snowdrops and crocuses. A blackbird chirruped as it found a safe place to sit. And on a hillside, in a shed, under a corrugated roof, a mother spoke to her son.

'Albi, that's a spider. Careful, keep your hoof off it. Don't tread on it. It didn't do you any harm.'

Albi, her young calf, wobbled as he held his hoof aloft and the

small creature scuttled away over the straw, past his mother's front hooves to the side of the shed, to safety. Albi sniffed after it.

'It's gone to weave a web to catch some flies,' his mother said.

'What for?'

'To eat.' A fly buzzed about Albi's mother's udders and she flicked her tail to shoo it.

'To eat?'

'Yes, spiders are carnivorous. That spider eats nothing but meat, the meat of flies and bugs. It knows no other way.'

'Carnivorous.' Albi practised the word.

Just then, the shed door creaked open. Morning light flooded in. Albi stepped behind his mother and stared past her white legs at a big human outside. The man opened the shed door wide, revealing a view of the yard, then he climbed back over the metal bars of its enclosure fence and was gone.

Albi had never been outside the shed before. He'd felt sunlight on his fur, but it had only been through a small crack in the shed roof.

'Is today the day?'

'Yes, Albi. It's warm enough now. Don't be scared.' His mother put her head behind his rump and nudged him.

Timidly, Albi stepped out. Strong shafts of warm sunlight hit his back. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the day's brightness. Under his feet, instead of straw there was glistening hard ground, dark and wet like the end of his own nose. Albi stood still. He breathed in the cool, fresh smells of the farmland nearby – grass, mud, soil with bulbs in it, and hellebore flowers, whose subtle scent was carried on a cold breeze all the way from the pine-smelling woods where the fir trees were. His mother had told him about these things. She'd already taught him a lot and it had all sunk in.

Like the other calves of the herd, Albi was much more advanced in his thinking and understanding than he looked. He was inexperienced, but he had soaked up his mother's lessons and he was ready to learn more about the world for himself.

As he shut his eyes and breathed in deeply, someone sniffed beside him. Albi looked to the left and jolted with surprise. A tawny calf stood there. This calf jumped with surprise too. Albi darted back into his shed.

'Mum, there's another calf next door! And it's got *blue* eyes.'

'That's normal,' his mum said, her pink eyes smiling. 'Other cows and calves have blue or black or brown eyes.'

'Are my eyes blue?'

'No. You're like me, Albi. White as snow with pink eyes. We're albinos.' She nudged her calf out again. 'Now go and make friends.'