

WYCHETTS

by William Holley

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To the old place and the Magic.

Prologue

The last block was hammered into place, sparks flashing in the darkness as metal clanged against stone. The ring of shadowy figures retreated, heads bowed as their leader raised his hands.

“It is done,” said a voice, deep and whispery. “The power of the Wise Ones is sealed.”

“And what now?” asked another, in a hoarse croak.

“Now we wait,” purred a woman. “We wait until the appointed time, when the Full Moon of Magister is in adjunction with the Seventh Sign of the House of Mordoran; for then it is foretold that the unsuspecting children will arrive to re-awaken the ancient force that resides within this place.”

“And then we make our move,” said the whispery voice. “The power of the Wise Ones will be ours, and the world will suffer in the grip of the Shadow Clan.”

A discordant gabble of cheers, hoots and whistles filled the blackness. Outside, the twisted branches of a dead tree reached into the night sky, grasping at the ashen orb of the moon.

The wait had begun; and the wait would last five hundred years...

1

Our New Home

Bryony's mum (her real mum, that is) said that one should always judge a house by its garden. Following that advice, Bryony could only conclude that her new home was going to be something between a rubbish dump and a hovel.

There was no lawn, no flowerbeds, nothing but a wall of overgrown weeds and briars that towered high above Bryony's head and hid the house itself from view.

Looming from the tangled vegetation was a dead looking tree, with branches like claws and a trunk that bore a spooky resemblance to an old man's ugly face. Bryony wasn't the nervous type, but there was something about the tree that gave her the creeps.

But it wasn't just the tree, or the awful state of the garden. There was something else that made Bryony feel uneasy: a weird sort of feeling, like she was being watched.

But Bryony knew that was unlikely. She was miles out of town, right in the middle of nowhere. There were just fields all around her, not a person or building in sight. No people, no traffic, no houses or shops.

She decided it was the remote location that put her on edge. No people or houses was bad enough, but Bryony wasn't sure if she could cope without shops.

“Are we really going to live here?” Bryony’s dark eyes rolled to fix her father with a fearful stare.

Bill Platt smiled and nodded. “So what do you think, darling?”

The question was not aimed at Bryony, but the slim, auburn haired woman who stood beside her.

Her name was Jane, and she was a teacher. She wore cardigans (which she knitted herself), flowery skirts and sandals. She smiled a lot and said everything was ‘lovely’. All of which was annoying enough, but she also insisted that Bryony call her ‘Mum’.

No way.

“Well what do you think?” asked Bill again, this time with a nervous edge to his voice.

Jane smiled that familiar sickly smile, and wrapped her skinny fingers around Bill’s arm. “The location is lovely. But I’d like to see the house before I give my full opinion.”

“Of course, darling. I’ll lead the way.” Bill pushed the rickety wooden gate. It wouldn’t budge, so he pushed harder, but still it refused to co-operate.

“Gate’s a bit swollen,” he grunted, leaning his full weight on the puny looking structure. “But don’t worry, I’ll have it open in a...”

There was a loud crack, and the gate disintegrated into a pile of rotten scrap wood.

“It’s no problem,” said Bill, kicking shards of splintered gate from the overgrown pathway. “Just needs a few nails. I’ll sort it first thing tomorrow.” He turned and beckoned to Jane and Bryony. “This way, ladies.”

Jane laid a hand on Bryony’s shoulder. “You go first, sweetheart.”

“I’m not your sweetheart.” Bryony twisted out of Jane’s grasp and marched off down the lane. “And the only place I’m going is home.”

“Wait,” called Bill, running after Bryony and seizing her arm. “We are home.”

Bryony shook her head. “I mean our proper home. In Mossy Glade Close.”

“But we’ve moved,” explained Bill, as though that fact could have somehow escaped his daughter’s attention. “This is our home now.”

It was the word ‘our’ that made Bryony’s stomach churn. If it wasn’t bad enough having to leave her lovely house in Mossy Glade Close for some overgrown tip in the middle of

nowhere, the prospect of having to live there with Jane made matters even more unbearable.

And of course there was the boy.

Bryony's stepbrother Edwin was the spitting image of his mother, with ginger hair, pale freckly skin and a body that would make a weight-conscious pipe cleaner jealous. And then there was his voice: a shrill, whining mewl that put Bryony's teeth on edge whenever she heard it. Which she now realised hadn't been for quite a while.

She glanced round to see where the annoying little brat had got to. As much as she hated to look at Edwin, Bryony hated it even more when she couldn't see him. It normally meant he was up to something; something that involved doing nasty things to her. Like last week, when the four of them went for a walk, he'd slipped a slug into the hood of her jacket. She hadn't found out until it started raining. And the week before, at the cinema, he'd sneaked a snail into her butter-toffee popcorn. And before that, at the Italian restaurant...

Bryony preferred not to dwell on that one; it had put her off meat balls for life.

Bryony looked all around, but her hated enemy was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Edwin?" she asked.

“I don’t know.” Jane’s sickly smile vanished. “He was with me a moment ago. Oh, don’t say he’s run off again!”

Jane scurried off down the lane, shrieking her son’s name. Bryony couldn’t help but smile, hoping Edwin had run off

That would put an end to her problems.

Well half of them, anyhow.

If Only Mice Could Talk

Edwin sat in the parked car, chewing on a squashed ham sandwich and plotting revenge.

He had always hated girls, but until he'd met Bryony Platt (or Brownie Splat, as he preferred to call her) Edwin hadn't realised how much he could hate them. She had to be the most horrible, unbearable, and downright evil member of the female species ever to blight the face of the earth.

You might not have thought it to look at her, though. Some (but Edwin definitely wasn't one of them) might even have called her pretty. But her heart shaped face, large dark eyes, and long black hair belied the monster that lurked beneath.

And she was a monster. Edwin had sensed this from the moment they'd met six months ago.

"This is Bryony," Mum had announced. "She's going to be your sister."

Sister? Edwin didn't want a sister, anymore than he wanted a new dad or a new home. He wanted things to be just like they were, in the old days. Before...

Edwin felt a sob coming on. He took a deep breath and almost choked on a lump of soggy sandwich. He coughed the offending morsel into his hand, and was about to throw it out of the window when he remembered Stubby.

The poor mite must be starving by now. Edwin dipped a hand into his jacket pocket and scooped up the bundle of brown fluff and whiskers that was his only true friend in the entire world.

He'd found the mouse in a dustbin three weeks ago. It looked like the poor creature had been attacked by a cat, because half his tail was missing (hence Edwin's choice of name). Edwin had nursed the mouse back to health, and grown so attached that he couldn't bear to let him go. Now Stubby lived in Edwin's pocket, and he went everywhere Edwin went. When Edwin felt down he talked to Stubby; which meant he talked to Stubby quite a lot these days.

"Here you are," he crooned, offering Stubby a lump of half chewed bread. Stubby sniffed, but seemed reluctant to sample the offering.

Edwin couldn't blame him. "She sat on them," he hissed. "On purpose. All the way here. But I'll get her back, don't you worry."

Stubby stared at him with those shiny black button eyes. If only mice could talk, thought Edwin. Lately he'd been

working on a method of communication based on squeaks and nose twitches (mice seemed to do this a lot), but so far his experiments with Stubby had yielded little in the way of results, except a few odd looks from people on the bus.

Edwin gazed out of the window, and sighed. The car was parked in a layby next to an open field, allowing an uninterrupted view of the landscape. On a fine day it probably would have been quite scenic; Edwin imagined the rolling hills draped in a patchwork of green fields shimmering in the sunshine. But today the sky was a sullen grey, and mist clung to the horizon like a drab, suffocating shroud.

He'd always liked the idea of living in the country, but right now Edwin would give anything to be back in their flat in the middle of town. It wasn't very big (at least not as big as Bryony's house), but it was home.

Or rather, it had been home. Because, as Mum kept telling him, they had a new home now. All of them.

Edwin's thoughts turned once again to Bryony, and he pondered on ways to get even with her. He'd tried slugs and snails, and then there had been the Italian restaurant incident, which still made him chuckle (even though they'd all been banned from the restaurant for life, and had to pay to have the ceiling cleaned).

But Bryony was made of stern stuff. Creepy crawlies didn't seem to freak her (not like they did Mum, anyhow), and Edwin knew he had to change tactics.

It might be time to play his trump card.

Grinning at the thought, Edwin stuffed another sliver of compressed sandwich into his mouth, only to cough it up again as a loud rapping noise sounded in his ear. He turned to see his mother banging on the car window.

“Edwin, what are you doing in there? Don't you want to see our new home?”

Edwin told her he didn't.

Jane tried to open the door, but luckily Edwin had locked it.

“But you must come,” she pleaded. “Unless you'd prefer to spend the rest of your life in the car?”

As it happened, the thought of spending the rest of his life in the car had already occurred to Edwin. It might be a bit cramped, and there were some basic sanitation issues to work around, but at least Bryony wouldn't be there.

“What are you holding?” Jane's frowning face came closer to the glass. “Have you still got that mouse? I told you to let him go. He's recovered now and should be released back to the wild. He'll be much better off in his natural environment.”

“So would I,” said Edwin, stuffing Stubby back into his pocket. “And that’s back in our flat, not living out here in some horrible new house with them.”

“You don’t know if the house is horrible,” said Jane. “You haven’t seen it yet.”

“Neither have you,” pointed out Edwin.

Jane pursed her lips, and Edwin saw an uneasy look in her eyes.

Edwin was right. Bill had arranged the purchase all by himself, and he wouldn’t let anyone see the house until today, the very day they moved in together. He said he wanted it to be ‘a surprise’.

But Edwin knew his mother didn’t like surprises; surprises made her jump and make screechy noises. Today she seemed quite nervous (even more than usual) and he wondered whether Bill might regret keeping their new home a secret.

That thought gave Edwin hope. Perhaps Mum might not like the house after all. Perhaps she might not want to move in with Bryony and Bill...

“Please darling.” Jane pressed her palms on the car window. “Come see the house with me.”

“All right,” sighed Edwin, licking the last remnants of sandwich from his fingers before prising the door open. “But I’m not talking to her.”

Jane took Edwin's arm and helped him out of the car. "Bryony is a very nice girl," she whispered, leading Edwin up the lane. "You'll find out once you get to know her."

"She hates you," said Edwin.

"No she doesn't."

"Then how do you explain the fact that she wrote 'I hate Jane' in permanent red felt-tip all over your brand new handbag?"

Jane smiled a forced looking smile. "It was just a joke. Her way of bonding with me. You really should try and get to know Bill, too."

"He's a berk," muttered Edwin, but when he saw Jane glaring at him he added, "You deserve a lot better."

"You say that about every man who even looks at me."

"I didn't say Alan was a berk."

"No. If I remember correctly you said he was a criminal."

"No I didn't. Tony was the criminal. Alan was an enemy spy."

"Of course he wasn't a spy."

"Anyone could see it. Who wears dark glasses indoors, and carries a black suitcase wherever they go?"

"Alan had sensitive retina. And he used his briefcase for work. He was an accountant."

"Aha! That's even worse than a spy."

“Edwin.” Jane drew her son close. “All I’m asking is that you give Bill a chance. I love him very much. He’s a decent, honest man. Not a criminal, a spy or an alien.”

“I never said he was,” insisted Edwin. “Jeremy was the alien. What with those slanty eyes, and that odd shaped bald head. And how he ate boiled eggs had to be seen to be believed...”

“Forget about Jeremy,” said Jane. “I’m married to Bill now. And I’d really appreciate if you made an effort to get on with him. Then you might realise what a wonderful person he is.”

Edwin grunted in response. There was, as far as he was concerned, no chance of that.

Bryony’s dad annoyed Edwin immensely; he reckoned he knew everything about everything, wore gaudy lumberjack shirts, and kept a pen in his breast pocket (Edwin had never met anyone else who did that, especially a pen that never had any ink in it).

Worse still, Bill treated Edwin like a child. A classic example was that very morning, when Edwin had tried to lift a box onto the removal lorry. Bill had waved him away, saying he wasn’t strong enough to do ‘man’s work’.

That infuriated Edwin; at ten years old he was more than capable of doing man’s work. He had been the man of the

house ever since his real dad had gone, doing all the manly jobs like putting out the rubbish, and disposing of creepy crawlies. But now, because Bill had turned up, Edwin had been deprived of his manly status and made to feel like a useless girl.

All of which was irritating enough, but Edwin would be prepared to overlook such character flaws if it wasn't for the fact that Bill Platt was responsible (at least partly) for the awful creature that Edwin saw standing in the lane ahead.

Bryony's dark eyes narrowed as they focussed on Edwin.

Bill smiled and waved. "We were wondering where you'd got to."

"He was sitting in the car," explained Jane, keeping a firm hold on Edwin as they reached Bill and Bryony. "Finishing off the sandwiches."

"Hungry eh?" Bill grinned and slapped Edwin hard on the back (which was another annoying habit he had). "Good lad. Need to build up those muscles."

"I've got muscles," said Edwin, scowling at his step-father.

"Of course you have." Bill planted another patronising slap on Edwin's shoulders. "Just need building up a bit, that's all."

“Enjoy the sandwiches?” asked Bryony, with her usual self-satisfied smirk.

Edwin tried to remain calm, telling himself that revenge was a dish best served cold. In any case, he had other things to worry about right now.

He peered past Bryony at the overgrown garden, then aimed a pleading stare at his stepfather.

“You can’t be serious.”

“It’s a little on the wild side,” admitted Bill.

Edwin thought that was a bit of an understatement. “There are probably uncharted regions of Amazonian rainforest better maintained than this.”

“Nonsense,” said Bill. “A quick going over with a lawnmower should do the trick. I’ll sort it first thing tomorrow. Now come on, everyone. Don’t you want to see the cottage?”

“We do,” said Jane, leading an unwilling Edwin into the garden.

His right foot struck something, and he looked down to see a chunk of demolished gate. There was writing on it, but he couldn’t quite make out the letters. Intrigued, Edwin reached down and wiped the grime from the wood to reveal the name of their new home.

“Why-ketts?” It was Bryony who spoke, her dark eyebrows puckering as she peered over Edwin’s shoulder.

“It’s pronounced ‘Witchitts’,” said Bill, taking the piece of gate from Edwin and pointing to each letter in turn. “W-Y-C-H-E-T-T-S. Witch-itts.”

“As in witch?” Bryony’s frown turned into a scowl.

Bill shrugged. “Probably just some silly nickname given by the previous owner.”

“I think it’s charming,” said Jane.

“I think it’s weird,” muttered Bryony. “Who would call a house a dumb name like that?”

“I don’t care about the name,” said Edwin. “It’s how weird the house is that worries me.”

Bill set off into the garden, but only managed a couple of strides before his path was blocked by a wall of weeds and briars. Unperturbed, he used a chunk of broken gate to hack at the rampant vegetation. It seemed to take ages, but eventually he managed to beat his way through.

Jane followed, taking an uneasy looking Edwin with her. Bryony hung back, pondering her options.

It was tempting to make a run for it, but she was in the middle of the country, and it wasn’t like she could jump on a passing bus. She could try walking, but had no idea how far it might be to the nearest town or village.

A chill breeze wafted through the garden. The dead tree creaked, its gnarled branches seeming to reach for her.

Bryony had that feeling of being watched again. Preferring not to be alone, she hurried through the gap in the weeds and found herself in a clearing alongside Bill, Jane and Edwin.

And there, right in front of them, was their new home.

Although, Bryony noted with horror, there was nothing particularly new about it...

3

Even Weirder House!

Bryony's worst fears were realised.

Wychetts: weird name. Even weirder house!

The building was irregular in design, if it had any design at all. Nothing was square or aligned, and it seemed as though the hap-hazard construction was the result of some freak architectural accident.

The upper storey juttred out from the lower, making the whole structure appear precariously top-heavy. The imbalanced feel was exaggerated by a tall, steep-sided gable, which rose from one end of the building and reminded Bryony of a pointed witch's hat.

But it wasn't just the bizarre appearance of the house that worried Bryony. The whole place was in a terrible state of disrepair.

The timber-framed walls were cracked and crumbling. The narrow, arched windows didn't have much glass left in them. The thatched roof had more holes in it than actual roof, and the crooked chimney seemed to defy the laws of gravity.

"Our very own country cottage," said Bill, grinning from ear to ear. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Again, his question was directed at Jane, but this time she didn't seem to know what to say.

"It's a dump," said Bryony, who had no problem expressing her opinion.

"It's old," said Bill. "It has character."

"Yeah," agreed Edwin. "The character of a dump."

"At least it's detached," said Bill.

"More like detach-ing." Bryony pointed to a section of wall that was in the process of crumbling away.

Bill dismissed his daughter's concerns with a shrug. "So, it needs a bit of work doing here and there."

Edwin snorted. "More like here, there and everywhere."

Another shrug from Bill. "But it won't take much to see an improvement."

Bryony nodded. "Five minutes and a bulldozer should be more than enough."

"Don't need a bulldozer," said Edwin. "May as well just wait for a strong breeze."

Bill's smile fell, and his gaze shifted to Jane. She gazed intently at the ruined house, her lips pursed thoughtfully, ginger head tilted sideways.

"Well, darling?" Bill clasped his hands as though in prayer. "Do you like your surprise?"

Bryony knew this was the first time Jane had seen the cottage. And she didn't look overly impressed.

"I think it's..."

Horrible, willed Bryony. Please say it's horrible. Dad won't listen to me. But if you don't like it...

"Lovely," trilled Jane, clapping her hands together. "I think it's absolutely lovely!"

"I knew you would." Bill grinned again. "We are going to be so happy here."

"Speak for yourselves," grumbled Bryony. "I'd be happier living in a bucket."

"Me too," said Edwin. "But not the same bucket. And it would have to be a very long way from Bryony's."

"You'll change your mind once you see inside," Bill assured them.

"We can see it already," pointed out Bryony. "Through the gaps in the roof."

"Just a bit of patching up required," promised Bill. "I'll sort it first thing tomorrow. Now come on in and take a look. I'm sure you'll like the cottage once you've seen the whole of it."

Bryony thought she had seen more than enough holes already.

Bill went up to the arched front door of the cottage. He took a large rusty key from his pocket, grinned at Jane, and then slid it into the lock.

He needn't have bothered. Before the key was turned the door fell inwards, hitting the floor with a rap that echoed through the decaying structure.

"Just needs a few screws," explained Bill. "I'll sort it first thing tomorrow. Now in you come."

Jane followed Bill through the cottage entrance, but Bryony remained outside. Her gaze wandered once again over the dilapidated building, and she shook her head as she pondered on the sorry condition of her father's mind. She'd thought he was mad marrying a woman like Jane. But buying a house like Wychetts...

"I've got a bad feeling about this place."

Edwin's voice interrupted Bryony's thoughts, and she turned to see that he was also studying the cottage.

"Me too," she agreed. "Looks sort of... spooky."

"Spooky, yeah." Edwin glanced at Bryony. "I'm not scared, though."

"Me neither," said Bryony.

"You look it," said Edwin.

"I don't. But you look scared. And stupid."

"Hurry up," urged Bill, waving at them from the doorway.

Eager to prove herself braver than her stepbrother, Bryony charged towards the door. Edwin followed, breaking into a run to catch up. The two of them slammed into each other, and ended up getting jammed in the doorframe.

Bryony pushed and shoved. Edwin pushed and shoved back, and it needed a sly dig in the ribs before he gave way with an agonised yelp.

“Ow, that hurt!”

“Good,” smirked Bryony. But her smirk became a grimace when she saw the dingy, narrow hallway. The walls were stained with brown blotches, and there was a horrible smell that reminded her of mouldy mushrooms.

“Just a touch of damp,” said Bill, noting his daughter’s wrinkled nose. “I’ll sort it first thing tomorrow.”

Bryony puffed her cheeks. At this rate Dad was going to have a very busy tomorrow. Or an averagely busy tomorrow that lasted for about fifty years.

“Wait until you see this.” Bill took Jane’s hand and strode off into the gloom. He halted in front of a wonky door and wrenched it open with a flourish. “Ta dah!”

“What is it?” Bryony squeezed past Jane, and found herself in a room that was even dingier and smellier than the hall.

“The study,” said Bill, as though it should have been obvious.

“Looks more like a dungeon,” observed Bryony.

“And a pretty basic one at that,” added Edwin, peering from behind his mother.

“I think it might be better as a dining room,” said Jane.

Bill shook his head. “But it’s perfect for a study, darling.”

Jane frowned. “What do we need a study for?”

Bryony’s heartbeat quickened. Were they going to have an argument? At long last? Oh please let them have an argument!

“Perhaps,” said Bill, patting Jane’s arm, “a dining room might be more appropriate.”

Jane smiled again. “Oh thank you, Bill. You’re so accommodating.”

They kissed. Bryony’s stomach lurched. She looked away and saw that Edwin looked just as repulsed.

Why couldn’t they argue? Just for once? Why did they have to be so nice to each other all the time? It was so horrible.

Bill took Jane’s arm and led her from the room. Bryony was about to follow, when she caught a glimpse of movement in the corner of her eye.

Startled, she instinctively grabbed the nearest human being; which unfortunately happened to be Edwin.

“Gerroff!” he growled, pushing her away.

Bryony was just as horrified at her actions.

“I saw something,” she explained, pointing into the corner of the room. “Something moved.”

Edwin’s expression changed from disgust to curiosity. “Could be a rat,” he pondered. “Must be a perfect breeding ground for them.”

Bryony knew what his little game was. “I’m not scared of rats. Wouldn’t be talking to you if I was. Anyway, this thing was bigger than a rat. More the size of a...”

Meeooow!

“A cat,” chuckled Edwin, pointing at the sleek feline form that emerged from the gloom. “That’s all it was, dumbbo.”

But this was not ‘just’ a cat. It was a beautiful creature, with a silky cream coat, chocolate coloured paws, and eyes that sparkled like emeralds. It wore a gorgeous diamond-studded collar, and purred softly as it came mincing towards them.

“Oh, you’re divine!” An entranced Bryony crouched and beckoned to the cat. “Here kitty. Come and say hello.”

The cat by-passed Bryony, seeming more interested in Edwin. It reached his feet and reared up, clawing at his jacket pocket.

“Get away!” he hissed. “Scat!”

It was Bryony's turn to laugh. "Now look who's scared. Here, kitty. Come to Auntie Bryony."

The cat left Edwin, and slinked towards Bryony's outstretched hand. Bryony grinned at Edwin, savouring her moment of triumph.

"I'm very good with animals. They all seem to like me. Guess I have a natural affinity with..."

Suddenly the cat lunged at Bryony, raking its needle sharp claws across her palm.

"Ow!" Bryony jumped back, shaking her injured hand. "Ow, ow, oooooowwww!"

"Edwin, what's happened? Are you all right?" Jane came running back into the room, her normally pale face even paler with anxiety.

Edwin was laughing so hard that he could hardly speak.

"Bryony... hah! Bryony was just showing me... hah! how good she is with animals. Haha!"

"I got attacked by a cat," growled Bryony, struggling to ignore the pain in her hand.

Jane hurried towards her. "Let me see, darling."

"I'm OK." Bryony snatched her wounded hand away from Jane. "And I'm not your darling."

"But it might be infected," fussed Jane. "You could go down with something nasty."

“I’d be more worried for the cat,” chortled Edwin.

“I’ll teach it a lesson,” vowed Bryony, scanning the room for her attacker. The cat sat on the window ledge, staring defiantly at her with its luminous emerald eyes. Bryony lunged, but the cat escaped through the broken pane before she could get within kicking range.

“What’s the hold up?” asked Bill, peering through the door.

“Nothing,” said Bryony, who didn’t want to look like a wuss in front of Edwin and Jane. She slipped her injured hand into her trouser pocket, and followed her father back through the hall and into another room that he called “the lounge”.

Bryony thought “the morgue” would be more fitting.

The lounge was much bigger than the dining room, but it was still gloomy and stank of mushrooms. There was no carpet, and the stone floor was cracked and uneven. Twisted wooden beams ran across the sagging ceiling, which looked like it could come crashing down at any second. And it was cold in here. Freezing, in fact.

As if reading her mind, Bill pointed to the far wall. “I think there’s a fireplace hidden behind the stonework. I’m going to open it up to provide some warmth.”

“A real fire would be lovely,” said Jane, nodding enthusiastically.

Bryony had another suggestion. “Why don’t we just burn the house?”

“Too damp,” chipped in Edwin.

“Now don’t be like that.” Bill gave both children an indignant look. “You’ll feel a lot better once I’ve got a nice log fire installed.”

“But what about central heating?” Bryony (like her real Mum) thought log fires a bit *passé*.

Bill chuckled at his daughter’s suggestion. “This is a very old house. When Wychetts was built people didn’t have central heating. Or electricity, for that matter.”

“No electricity?” Edwin reacted to this news with a look of sheer terror. “So we don’t have any lights?”

Bryony wondered why Edwin found this so upsetting. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Scared of the dark?”

“No.” Edwin’s freckles vanished as his cheeks flushed bright red. “It’s just... um... we won’t be able to watch TV.”

“No TV!” The sudden realisation made Bryony feel sick.

“Don’t worry,” said Bill. “I’ll get it sorted first thing tomorrow.”

“But there’s no TV,” whined Bryony, on the verge of hysterics. “I can’t last until tomorrow without TV.”

“We don’t need television,” said Jane. “We have each other for company.”

As far as Bryony was concerned, that was exactly why she needed television.

“But Mum,” bleated Edwin. “What about tonight?”

“Don’t worry,” whispered Jane, brushing Edwin’s ginger locks. “I’ve brought a supply of candles.”

“What about a water supply?” Another thought had just struck Bryony. “Is there hot running water?”

“The only things running around here are probably cockroaches,” said Edwin.

Jane shuddered. “Please don’t say things like that, darling. I’m sure the house has a water supply.”

Bill nodded, without appearing convinced. “Yeah. I’m almost sure it has. It has a kitchen, just down here.”

Bill left the lounge, with Jane following close behind. Bryony stood still, her attention suddenly drawn to the wall at the end of the room. Dad said there was a fireplace behind it, but Bryony sensed there was something else hidden there.

Something ancient. Something powerful.

Something that had been there a very long time.

Waiting.

Waiting for her.

All Mod Cons

“Do you think it’s a skeleton?”

“What?” Bryony frowned at Edwin.

“Do you think there’s a skeleton behind the wall? It’s just the sort of house to have a skeleton bricked up somewhere.”

Bryony wanted to tell Edwin not to be so dumb, but she couldn’t help feeling he might be right.

“Come on kids,” called Bill. “Come and see the kitchen!”

Putting thoughts of entombed skeletons from her mind, Bryony left the lounge with Edwin, and followed the sound of Bill’s voice through another gloomy passage into yet another gloomy room.

The kitchen didn’t look like a kitchen at all. There was an old china sink, but no wall-mounted storage units, no working surface, and nothing at all in the way of modern appliances. Mind you, reflected Bryony, there was no point having a fridge or cooker if you didn’t have any gas or electricity.

“Don’t worry,” said Bill. “I’ll install a nice fitted kitchen.”

“This time,” sighed Bryony, “make sure it actually fits.”

She recalled one of her father’s previous attempts at home improvements. He’d put all the cupboard doors on back to front, and somehow rigged up the electric oven so it was

cooler than the fridge (and vice versa). Mum had gone loopy, and they'd had to get professionals in to rip everything out and start again.

"I'm sure it will be lovely," crooned Jane, giving her husband's arm an encouraging pat. "But what about the bathroom?"

"Right here." Bill strode to a door at the end of the room.

"A downstairs bathroom?" Bryony was horrified at the idea.

"Of course," said Bill, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. "Old houses didn't have bathrooms put in until quite recently. And there wasn't room upstairs."

"But a bathroom... downstairs?" Bryony shook her head slowly. Mum (her real Mum, obviously) would have gone crazy at the thought. It was so downmarket; even worse than having a shared driveway.

Bill smiled and opened the door, beckoning Bryony to take a look inside.

She did so, and suddenly the fact that the bathroom was on the ground floor didn't seem to matter at all. It would have been just as revolting wherever it was.

The cracked tiled floor was peppered with mould. The toilet resembled some archaic instrument of torture, with a wooden seat that looked like it would give you splinters.

Above, mounted crookedly on the wall, was a large box-like tank (which Bill called a cistern) from which dangled a rusty chain that looked like it would snap if you dared pull it.

The rest of the 'suite' wasn't much better: the sink had grass growing in it, and the ancient cast iron bath looked an ideal breeding-ground for newts.

"See," said Bill. "All mod cons."

"Hold up." Bryony grabbed Bill's arm as he turned away. "There is no way in a million years I am using that bathroom."

"Of course not," agreed Bill. "I've organised alternative sanitary arrangements until such time as the bathroom facilities are operational."

"Such as?"

Bill grinned. "A bucket."

"Bucket?" Bryony could scarcely bring herself to repeat the word.

"Don't worry," said Bill. "I'm not expecting us to share one bucket between us. I've got a spare one in case of emergencies."

Bryony gritted her teeth and glared at Bill. "There's going to be an emergency very soon. And it'll need more than a bucket to clean up the mess when I've finished with you."

“Come now Bryony,” said Jane. “There’s no need to get angry with your father. Could we take a look upstairs please, Bill?”

The stairs were hardly worthy of the name. Winding, steep and narrow, the wooden steps groaned noisily underfoot, and felt as though they would collapse second. A rope fixed to the wall served as a banister, but it was so dirty that Bryony would rather not touch it, so she gripped Bill’s sleeve as they scaled the decaying edifice.

It seemed to take ages to reach the landing. This was yet another gloomy passage, with a floor so wonky that it impossible to walk in a straight line.

Bill reached the first door and opened it, revealing a large room with a big bay window.

“The master bedroom. Jane and I will be sleeping here.”

“Where’s my room?” demanded Bryony.

“We’re just coming to that.” Bill walked shakily down the landing until he reached the second door. “This one is yours. But...”

Bryony pushed past him, yanked the door open, and inspected her new bedroom.

At first, she was pleasantly surprised. It wasn’t as big as her room in Mossy Glade Close, but it was light and airy, and didn’t smell half as bad as the rest of the house.

“Just mind the floorboards,” warned Bill, taking Bryony’s arm as she stepped forwards. “There’s a spot of woodworm. I’ll sort it first thing tomorrow. Along with the ceiling.”

Prompted by her father, Bryony glanced up at the ceiling. Or rather, the place where the ceiling should have been.

The plaster, and a sizeable portion of the roof, had crumbled away to reveal a patch of grey sky between the rotting rafters.

No wonder the room was so airy!

Aghast, Bryony was about to tell Bill what she thought of her new bedroom, when something whizzed past her left shoulder, its hoarse cry causing her to recoil with fright.

Crraaaa-aaawwwkkkkk!

Bryony screamed and clung to her father, her wide eyes following the ragged black form as it settled on a sagging rafter.

Edwin laughed. “You look scared now, that’s for sure.”

“No I’m not,” insisted Bryony, trying to recover her composure. “This is my surprised look. Anyway, it’s just a silly crow.”

“It’s a jackdaw,” sniffed Edwin. “Can’t you tell the difference?”

“Takes one bird-brain to recognise another,” mumbled Bryony, before examining the bird.

It was an odd looking specimen, with tatty feathers and a bald patch on its head. Its eyes were tiny grey dots; tiny grey dots that returned Bryony's stare with equal hostility.

"Shoo! Go away!" Bill hissed at the bird. The jackdaw spread its tatty wings, let out another croak, and disappeared through the hole in the roof.

"It's gone now," said Bill, as though somehow that made everything all right.

But as far as Bryony was concerned, everything was far from all right. About as far away from all right as you could possibly get.

"There is no way I'm sleeping here," she huffed. "I'll die of exposure."

"You won't have to sleep in there." Bill led Bryony out of the room and back onto the wonky landing. "At least not until it's ready. In the meantime you'll be in there." He pointed to the last door, which Jane had already opened. "With Edwin."

"With Edwin?" The words cut through Bryony's heart like a dagger.

"With me?" Edwin looked and sounded even more horrified. "Mum, tell him I can't share a room with her!"

Jane inspected the room, and grimaced. "It's not very big."

“Not very big?” Bryony peered past Jane’s shoulder, and gawped with dismay at the tiny space beyond. “Our broom cupboard in Mossy Glade Close had more room. With brooms in it.”

“It’s only temporary,” said Bill. “Until I get your room sorted out.”

“And how long will that take?” demanded Edwin.

“Not long. Just a few rotten planks that need replacing.”

“There’s only one rotten plank around here,” seethed Bryony. “And that’s you, Dad.”

“Come now Bryony,” said Jane. “That’s no way to speak to your father.”

“I can speak to him how I want,” snapped Bryony. “And surely even you can see I’m right. We can’t live here; the whole place is falling to bits.”

Edwin nodded. “And there’s no electricity.”

Bill looked offended. “But I’m going to do it up. Think how it will look once it’s finished.”

“No need,” said Bryony. “I’d say it was pretty much finished already. Anyway Dad, what do you know about repairing old houses? You’re a vacuum cleaner salesman, not a builder.”

“An ex-vacuum cleaner salesman,” said Edwin.

Bryony saw her father flinch. He didn't like being reminded that he was currently out of work. But this was no time to go soft on him.

"Well?" she asked, folding her arms and tilting her head sideways. "What have you got to say about that?"

Bill ran a hand through his hair, and then nodded. "OK, kids. You've had your say. Now it's Jane's turn. Darling, what do you think?"

All eyes turned to Jane.

"We're waiting," said Bryony.

Jane put a hand to her mouth. She looked like she was about to cry, and Bryony sincerely hoped that she would.

Please say you hate it. Please...

"I..." Jane looked at Bill. "I think it's..."

Her lips quivered, and then creased into that all too familiar smile.

"Lovely. I think it's lovely. The loveliest house in the entire world. And you are the loveliest man for finding it."

She threw her arms around Bill and kissed him again.

"You mean we're staying?" Bryony couldn't believe it. "We're actually going to live in this hovel?"

Bill finally put Jane down, and then put his arms around Edwin and Bryony. "You wait, kids. I'll restore the cottage to

its former glory. Then you'll see what an amazing place Wychetts really is.”

The Face in the Wall

“Dear Mum...” Bryony shuddered, and pulled the sleeping bag tighter around her shoulders as she started writing. “We have just moved to our new home. It’s called Wychetts and is very...” She thought hard about her choice of word. “Old. Dad says it was built over five hundred years ago, and is of special historic interest. It’s certainly historic, but I wouldn’t call it interesting. The whole place stinks of mouldy mushrooms, and is falling to bits. There’s no electricity, so I’m writing this letter by candlelight.”

Bryony glanced at the candle, which was wedged crookedly into an old bottle. The flame guttered as a cold draft wafted through a crack in the wall.

At night, Wychetts was even spookier than the day. There were lots of strange creaky-groany noises, and it seemed as though the house was alive.

“This place gives me the creeps,” she wrote, shuddering again. “It could be haunted, but I don’t think any self respecting ghost would be seen dead in a dump like this.”

She frowned, and struck a line through the last sentence. Ghosts were supposed to be dead already, so it didn't really make sense.

Bryony found herself thinking of entombed skeletons. Deciding it was better to focus on her letter, she hurriedly put pen to paper again.

"When we got here, I was attacked by a cat." Bryony studied the wound on her hand. "It has healed quite well, but is still a little sore. Anyhow, things got worse. There was a mix up with the removal men. Dad (surprise-surprise!) gave them the wrong directions, and they ended up getting lost. When they eventually turned up, they found out they couldn't fit anything through the front door. The removal men just cleared off and left everything in the garden. We haven't got any beds, so I'm sleeping on the floor instead. And what's worse, I'm having to share a room with..."

Something stirred next to her, and a bony elbow dug into her ribcage.

"Ow!" shrieked Bryony. "Watch it, will you?"

Edwin's ginger head emerged from his sleeping bag. "It's not my fault. You're taking up too much room."

"I need more room than you," said Bryony.

Edwin chuckled. "You can say that again."

Bryony gasped. "Are you saying I'm fat?"

“Not all of you. Just your bottom, and everything attached to it.”

Bryony clenched her teeth. “My bottom’s not half as fat as your lip will be if you don’t get out of my face.”

“I wouldn’t go anywhere near your face,” spat Edwin. “Even if I could work out which end of you it is.”

Bryony couldn’t think of a suitable rejoinder, so rolled on her side and turned her attention back to the letter.

Writing letters to Mum was a great source of comfort to Bryony. She wrote at least five times a week, and told Mum every little detail of her life: every bad hair day, every boy who even glanced in her direction, every time Dad made a fool of himself (which was pretty often these days), and everything and anything else she thought Mum should know.

If only she had Mum’s address, then she could actually get round to sending them.

But Dad wouldn’t tell her, no matter how she begged him. He said he didn’t know, but Bryony could tell he was lying.

“I miss you,” she wrote, dabbing her watery eyes with her sleeping bag. “I hope you are keeping well, and...”

“It’s your mum, isn’t it?”

Bryony glanced round to see Edwin staring at her from the folds of his sleeping bag.

“You’re writing a letter to your mum, aren’t you?”

“Might be.” Bryony shrugged. “Don’t see what it has to do with you.”

“Do you see her much?”

“All the time.”

Edwin looked doubtful. “That’s not what I reckon. I reckon you haven’t seen or heard from her for ages. I reckon you don’t even know where she lives.”

“Of course I know where she lives. She lives in America.”

“But you don’t know her address, do you?”

“I know her address,” lied Bryony. “Anyway, you don’t know anything about my mum.”

“I know more than you think,” said Edwin. “I know she ran off with the office cleaner.”

“That’s not true,” snarled Bryony. “He was a Hygienic Cleansing Executive.”

“That was three years ago, wasn’t it?”

Bryony was enraged. How dare Jane tell her weedy little son all about Mum? And how dare Dad tell Jane in the first place!

Another blast of cold air blew through the room. Edwin’s grin vanished as the candle flame flickered.

“Go back to sleep,” grumbled Bryony, moving the candle to a more sheltered position in the corner.

“Put it back,” said Edwin, as the light faded from his half of the room.

“No,” said Bryony.

Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, Edwin started screaming. “Put the candle back!”

Now Bryony realised what this was all about.

“You are scared of the dark! That’s why you freaked out when Dad said there was no electricity.”

Edwin stared back at her, his wide eyes reflecting the candlelight, and making him look like a zombie.

“Just put it back,” he whispered. “Then I’ll let you write your letter in peace.”

Bryony laughed scornfully. “Tell you what, I don’t think I’ll bother writing my letter anymore. Think I’ll just go to sleep instead.” She lifted the candle, and pursed her lips as if to blow. “Don’t need this anymore then, do we?”

“Don’t!” screamed Edwin. “Please don’t!”

Bryony revelled in the boy’s fear. “You’re pathetic. Just like your mum. No wonder your dad walked out on the pair of you.”

“He didn’t walk out,” mewled Edwin. “It wasn’t like that.”

Bryony had always been curious about Edwin's father. Dad wouldn't speak about it, even though she'd asked repeatedly.

"Tell me what happened," she ordered. "Or I'll blow out the candle."

Edwin shook his head. "I can't..."

Bryony took a deep breath, and was about to plunge the room into darkness when Edwin lunged and wrenched the candle from her grasp.

But Bryony wouldn't surrender without a fight, and threw herself at Edwin, knocking the candle from his hand. The flame flared brightly as the bottle rolled across the bare wooden floor.

Encased in their sleeping bags, Bryony and Edwin squirmed towards the escaping candle. Bryony got there first. Desperate, Edwin threw himself on top of her.

There was a loud, piercing crack. Bryony wondered if she'd broken an arm or a leg. Then there was another crack, louder this time. Then a splitting noise, followed by a low rumble.

Then Bryony was falling.

Edwin clung to her, screaming as they careered downwards in an avalanche of shattered wood and plaster.

Their fall was short, ending abruptly when their knotted sleeping bags snagged on a jagged ceiling beam, and leaving them dangling inches above the floor.

Bryony hung there for a few moments, stunned. Then she heard a soft whimpering in her ear. It was Edwin, clinging to her like a frightened baby.

“What happened?” he whined.

“The floor collapsed,” said Bryony, shaking dust from her hair.

“Where are we?”

Bryony gazed around her. A beam of moonlight shone through the glassless window, illuminating their surroundings.

“Looks like the lounge,” she muttered, extricating herself from her sleeping bag and dropping to the floor.

Edwin did likewise, with slightly more of a struggle, and then gazed upwards at a large hole in the ceiling. “The floorboards must have been rotten.”

“This whole place is rotten,” reflected Bryony. “We’re lucky we weren’t killed.”

Bryony’s relief turned to terror when she heard a sharp splintering noise from above.

A hefty ceiling beam sheared in two. One end came swinging down, missing Bryony’s head by inches before slamming into the end wall and cracking the stonework.

Bryony caught her breath, and waited for her heartbeat to calm before speaking. “This is all your fault. Wait till I tell Dad.”

“You can’t blame me,” wailed Edwin. “It wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t messed about with the candle.”

He grabbed hold of her again, and Bryony could feel that he was trembling.

But then she realised it wasn’t just Edwin that was trembling. The whole house seemed to be shaking...

A low rumble sounded. Bryony wondered if it was an earthquake. The cracked stone wall was bulging, and then the slabs started to crumble, dissolving tier by tier to reveal dark emptiness beyond.

But it wasn’t empty. Bryony could see something in there. Something that looked like...

A face?

Intrigued, Bryony pushed Edwin away and walked cautiously towards the hole in the wall. It was hard to see in the dark, but as she drew closer she realised it was a face. But not a human one. Well, not entirely.

The features were bizarre and bestial: a cross between an animal and a man.

“It’s a monster!” shrieked Edwin, still huddled on the floor in his sleeping bag.

“Don’t be dumb,” said Bryony. “It’s just some sort of carving.”

She got to within a stride of the face, and lifted her hand to touch it. Her fingers were millimetres away when it happened.

The face’s mouth creased into a hideous smile, revealing rows of jagged teeth.

Then its eyes flickered open, swivelling to fix Bryony with a cold, malevolent stare...

6

It's Alive!

Bryony opened her mouth to scream, but Edwin beat her to it. Then another voice added to the din.

“Bryony? Bryony!” A torch beam swept the rubble strewn room. “What on earth happened here?”

“Dad!” Bryony turned and threw her arms around her father. “Oh Dad! Save me!”

“Edwin?” Jane appeared behind her husband, and was nearly knocked over by her wailing son. “Oh my darling, what happened?”

“It’s alive,” gurgled Edwin. “Alive!”

“What is?” Bill angled his torch from floor to ceiling. Or what was left of the ceiling. “Crikey! What have you done?”

“Never mind about that.” Bryony pulled away from Bill and pointed at the end of the room. “Look over there.”

Bill strode forwards, playing the torch across the crumbled wall. Then he froze as the beam picked out the hideous features of the evil face.

“Keep away,” warned Bryony. “It’s alive.”

Bill stepped back, and then chuckled. “It’s only a wooden carving.”

“Really?” Jane disentangled herself from Edwin and took the torch from Bill. “Let me see.”

“Well?” asked Bill, after allowing Jane to conduct her analysis. “You’re the expert. What do you make of it?”

Jane shrugged her bony shoulders. “I’m a history teacher, but no specialist in period architecture. I’d hazard a guess and say it’s some sort of decorative motif, perhaps a charm against evil spirits. Difficult to date, perhaps early medieval. I’ve never seen anything like it before. Isn’t it beautiful?”

“Amazing,” agreed Bill, taking the torch back from Jane and shining it into the face’s leering eyes. “But I wonder why it was concealed behind the wall. It’s almost as if... aha!” He shone the torch downwards, revealing a large opening beneath the wooden face. “Just as I thought. There’s a hearth, look. It’s an inglenook.”

“A what?” Bryony peered nervously from behind her father.

“A fireplace. I knew there would be one here somewhere.”

“Aren’t you clever?” trilled Jane, patting Bill’s shoulder.

Bryony’s gaze followed the torch beam as Bill illuminated their discovery. The fireplace reminded her of a giant brick-built barbecue. She guessed it was almost two metres wide, and tall enough for her to stand up in. The eerie face was

carved into a chunky wooden beam that spanned the hearth and supported the weight of the chimney-breast above.

“Isn’t that great?” Bill turned round to face the children. “We got ourselves a fireplace, kids.”

Bryony didn’t share her father’s joy. “Fantastic. Guess that makes up for having no bedroom floor.”

Bill shone the torch upwards again, and shrugged. “Just a touch of woodworm. I’ll sort it...”

“First thing tomorrow?” asked Bryony, dark eyebrows arching.

Bill coughed. “Well, perhaps sometime after lunch. Anyway, you’ll have to sleep downstairs tonight.”

“No way,” said Bryony. “Not with that horrible thing.”

“Oh come on,” laughed Bill. “Edwin’s not that bad.”

“I didn’t mean Edwin,” sighed Bryony. “Although he is horrible. I was talking about the face. It’s alive.”

Bill laughed even louder. “Oh don’t be...”

“She’s telling the truth,” squealed Edwin. “We saw it move.”

Jane smiled and put an arm around her son. “It must have been moving shadows. It’s only a wooden carving.”

Bill pointed the torch at the face again, and Bryony forced herself to look at those horrible features. It certainly didn’t

seem alive now. As much as she hated to admit it, she realised that Jane was probably right.

“I’m still not sleeping in here,” she grumbled.

“Me neither,” said Edwin.

“Fine,” agreed Bill. “There’s always the study. I mean,” he added, after glancing at Jane, “the dining room.”

“What?” Bryony was horrified. “That stinky prison cell? I’d rather kip in the garden.”

Voices in the Garden

Sleeping in the garden wasn't actually half as dumb as it sounded. That's where Bryony's bed was, after all; along with the rest of the furniture.

Edwin was sleeping upstairs with Jane. Dad had hunkered down in the study (or dining room, or whatever it was going to be), so there was nowhere else for her to go in any case.

It was a chilly night, but Bryony had her coat on over her night clothes, plus a woolly hat and mittens, two scarves, and three pairs of socks, so she didn't feel too cold. She snuggled down in her sleeping bag and curled into a ball, listening to the hiss of the wind and the repetitive chirping of insects.

She had almost nodded off when something woke her with a start.

Crraaaa-aaawwwkkkkk!

Bryony forced her head up out of her nylon cocoon and glimpsed a ragged, bird-shaped silhouette flitting across the sky. There was a rustling sound, and then she heard voices.

"Has it happened?" asked the first, deep and throaty. "Is it them?"

The second voice was female, soft and purring. “It is as foretold. The Full Moon of Magister is in adjunction with the Seventh Sign of the House of Mordoran. The unsuspecting children have come, and awoken the power.”

Bryony craned her neck, but saw only murky shadows.

“So what is to be done?” asked another voice, this one hoarse and croaky. “Shall we make our move now, whilst they sleep?”

“We need not be hasty,” came the purred reply. “They are fools, and do not understand the nature of the power they possess. We shall proceed as planned, and make our move tomorrow.”

There was rustling, and Bryony saw a pale shape slinking off through the undergrowth. She wondered if it might be that horrid cat that scratched her. But cats didn’t talk. So who had been out here, whispering in the bushes?

Of course, it might all be a dream. Perhaps the whole day had been one big nightmare. Perhaps she was really asleep, lying in her bed in Mossy Glade Close. Perhaps Mum had never left, and Dad hadn’t married Jane. Perhaps Mum would walk into her room and wake her up any second, and everything would be back the way it was...

“Mum?” Bryony opened her eyes and smiled at the face that hovered over her.

“Good morning,” said Jane. “Did you have a good night’s sleep?”

Bryony’s smile twisted into a grimace. “You? What are you doing in my room? Where’s Mum?”

“Your mother’s in America. And you’re not in your room, remember?”

Bryony sat up and looked around. For a moment she thought she must still be dreaming, but then everything came flooding back.

Jane was right. Bryony wasn’t in her room; she was in a garden. It was morning, and the bright sun shone on the pointy, hole riddled roof of a dilapidated old cottage.

“Oh no.” Bryony groaned, and dragged a hand across her face. “It’s real.”

Bill emerged from the cottage, waving at Bryony as he negotiated his way through a maze of abandoned furniture.

“Where are you off to?” asked Jane, catching her husband’s arm before he slipped past.

“Got to get renovations started,” explained Bill. “So I’m off to town to buy some materials.” He waved a piece of paper in front of Jane’s face. “I’ve made a list. I need six sheets of plywood, a saw, a hammer, two boxes of nails, and sticky tape.”

“What do you need the sticky tape for?” asked Jane.

“Purely precautionary,” said Bill. “It’s just that nailing stuff isn’t my strong point.”

“But do you have to go now, darling?”

“No time to lose. Sooner I start work, the better.”

“But what about breakfast?”

“I’m not hungry, thanks.”

Jane looked crestfallen. “But as it’s our first morning here, I thought it would be nice if we ate together. As a family.”

“We’re not a family,” cut in Bryony. “And we never will be.”

“But I’ve prepared everything,” said Jane. “I’ve laid the table. Well, the floor, at any rate.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie-pops.” Bill wriggled free of Jane’s grasp and hurried off down the garden. “I shouldn’t be too long. Oh, and by the way, there’s still no sign of Edwin. You might like to check on him. Bye!”

Jane turned pale, and scampered back into the cottage. Bryony flopped back on the bed and breathed a deep sigh. Life wasn’t fair. Why should she have to be stuck in this hovel with smiley Jane and her horrible son? Why couldn’t she have gone to America with Mum?

She had asked. She had pleaded. Mum hadn’t said ‘no’, exactly. Just that she was too busy, and that when things

settled down in a couple of months, there might be a chance for Bryony to join her.

But that had been three and a half years ago (three years, six months and thirteen days, Bryony corrected herself). Surely things must have settled down by now?

A creaky noise interrupted her sad reflections, and Bryony looked up to see that dead tree looming over her. She examined it for a while, once again struck by the twisted trunk's eerie similarity to an old man's face.

Then Bryony realised something.

The tree shouldn't have been there. It had been down the other end of the garden when she'd seen it yesterday.

Bryony sat up and peered down the garden. Dad had cut a lot of the weeds back to accommodate the furniture, so she could see right down to the lane; but there was no other tree in sight.

She turned back and studied the tree more closely. There was no doubt it was the same one. There couldn't be two trees that ugly.

But how had it got here? Trees didn't move.

Guessing her memory must be playing tricks on her, Bryony slipped from the bed and walked into the cottage, removing her hat, scarf and coat as she went. She traipsed down the hallway (holding her nose to block out the

mushroom smell) and headed into the dining room where plates, cups and saucers had been neatly laid out on the floor.

Bryony helped herself to some cereal (not her favourite brand, but some horrible healthy muesli-muck Jane had chosen), but as there was no fridge the milk was lukewarm, so she ended up leaving most of it.

Jane had made a pot of tea, and Bryony poured herself a cup as she listened to muffled voices from upstairs. She could hear Jane talking, and Edwin whining in response. Then she heard the stairs creaking, and moments later Jane came into the dining room. She was alone.

“What’s up with dimwit?” asked Bryony, taking a sip of tea.

She instantly regretted it. That’s taking a sip, not calling Jane’s son a dimwit.

“This is rank,” she gurgled, spitting what she hadn’t swallowed back into the cup. “Tastes like gnat’s wee. My mum’s tea was much nicer than this.”

If Jane was offended, she didn’t show it. “It’s herbal tea. Edwin likes it, and so does your father.”

“No he doesn’t,” countered Bryony. “You don’t know what he likes. You hardly know him at all.”

Jane’s jaw clenched. “As you asked about Edwin, you might like to know that he isn’t feeling very well.”

Bryony laughed. “Aw, diddums.”

An awkward silence followed. Then, just as Bryony was about to make good her escape, Jane spoke again. “Here, I have a present for you.”

“A present?” Bryony tried hard to sound uninterested. “But it’s not my birthday.”

Jane’s smile returned. “It isn’t a birthday present. It’s just a little something to celebrate us moving in together.”

Bryony didn’t think that was anything to celebrate, but wasn’t one to turn down a present, whatever the reason. “So where is it?”

Jane’s smile broadened as she produced a plastic bag from behind her back. “I haven’t finished it yet, mind. I just want to know what you think before I get too far.”

Bryony’s hopes crashed as she saw the hideous knitted monstrosity that Jane pulled out of the bag.

“What’s that?” she gasped, unable to hide her revulsion.

“A cardigan,” said Jane, proudly holding the garment aloft. “Do you like it?”

There was another long, drawn out silence before Bryony voiced her opinion.

“It’s orange,” she murmured, trying hard to keep her muesli down.

Jane nodded, seemingly oblivious to her stepdaughter's disgust. "I'm thinking of adding some flowers."

"Flowers?" Bryony repeated the word in a husky whisper. She never, ever, wore anything with flowers on it.

"So what do you think?" asked Jane, caressing her woolly creation. "If it's not your style, just say..."

"Style?" Bryony spluttered the word. "What do you know about style? You dress like a dummy in a charity shop window. My Mum wouldn't be seen dead in rags like that."

Jane's smile flickered. "I'll change the colour if you want. Would you prefer turquoise?"

"Turquoise?" Bryony's entire face creased with disdain. "Who wears anything turquoise?"

"I'm sorry." Jane stuffed the cardigan back into the bag. "I'm just trying to be friendly."

"I wouldn't bother," snarled Bryony. "We'll never be friends."

Jane chewed her bottom lip, then smiled again. "Do you have any plans for today?"

Bryony didn't have any plans, but she had a horrible feeling Jane did.

"I'm busy. Got a letter to finish. To my mum. My real mum."

“I see.” Jane had somehow managed to manoeuvre herself between Bryony and the door. “But it won’t take all day to write a letter, will it?”

“So?” Here it comes, thought Bryony.

Jane cleared her throat. “I wondered if you might like to help me this morning? There are lots of jobs that need doing around the house. I thought if we worked together it might help us bond. Get to know each other better. How does that sound?”

Marginally worse than rabies, as far as Bryony was concerned. But before she could think of an excuse, Jane had handed her a dustpan and brush.

“It’s going to be fun. I thought we could start with the bathroom.”

8

You Can Talk!

Edwin lay huddled in his sleeping bag, still trying to blot those evil, leering features from his mind. Mum had assured him it was just a chunk of carved wood, but he'd seen it move. And so had Bryony.

Edwin wasn't sure whose evil leering features he found more troubling. How he hated that girl; even more now she knew he was scared of the dark.

Well, not scared exactly; more like petrified.

Still, he knew just how to get back at her.

He had the letter.

The thought of revenge cheered Edwin up a little. But he was still worried about Stubby.

The mouse had been safe in Edwin's pyjama pocket, but what had happened to it when they fell through the ceiling? Edwin preferred not to dwell on that too much; the poor mite was surely crushed to death.

Oh Stubby! Edwin's only friend in the entire world, gone!

"What are you snivelling at?" asked a shrill voice.

Edwin sat bolt upright, grey eyes swivelling as he scanned the room. "Who said that?"

“Who do you think, cloth-head?”

There was no-one in sight. Edwin shrank back into his sleeping bag. He wasn't used to voices from nowhere. Someone at school had heard them, and he'd been carted off in an ambulance. Edwin couldn't remember if it was the Maths or Science teacher.

“Down here, thicky.”

Edwin followed the sound of the voice, and jumped when he saw the small, fluffy brown form on the floor. “Stubby!”

“Must you insist on calling me that?” asked the mouse. “It's not a very elegant name. Couldn't you have chosen something grander? Like Montmorency? Or Algernon? Or Horatio? Or...”

“Aaaarrgghh!” shrieked Edwin. “You can talk!”

“Of course I can talk,” said Stubby. “Or do you think these noises are just a symptom of acute indigestion?”

Edwin took a deep breath, struggling to maintain his composure. “But how? Why?”

Stubby stood up on his hind legs, and stared at Edwin with his shiny black button eyes. “The ‘how’ is tricky to explain at present. The ‘why’ is altogether more simple. I can talk because you wanted me to.”

“I did?” Edwin's shock was replaced by wonder. “I did, didn't I? I always wished that you could talk to me.”

“And so did I,” revealed Stubby. “The times I’ve listened to you pouring out your heart and soul to me. How I longed that I could respond, how I wished I could speak and tell you...”

“Tell me what?” asked Edwin, eagerly.

“To put a great big sock in it, that’s what.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you go on,” groaned the mouse. “On and on and on, moaning about this, snivelling about that. No-one likes me! I can’t do my geography homework! I don’t want to wear those purple underpants Auntie Kath gave me! Moan moan, snivel snivel... it’s more than any mouse should have to take.”

Edwin was taken aback by Stubby’s tirade. “Sorry. I don’t mean to go on like that. But life can be hard.”

“Hard? You don’t know the meaning of the word. Hard is having to spend every hour of the day stuffed up in some boy’s smelly pocket, eating nothing but left-over sandwiches and having to listen to him going on and on without being able to tell him to belt right up.”

“It’s not my fault you couldn’t talk back to me,” protested Edwin. “Anyway, I tried to communicate with you in your own language.”

“Oh, that’s what all those silly squeaks and nose twitches were supposed to be? I thought you were having some sort of seizure.”

“So it wasn’t Mouse?”

“More like Hamster, actually.”

“Isn’t that close enough?”

Stubby shrieked with outrage. “Mouse is a much more sophisticated language than Hamster. All hamsters have to worry about is running around in plastic wheels and how much cardboard they can chew in a day. Mice have a much broader horizon, hence a richer vocabulary. You’d never be able to master the grammatical intricacies of Mouse. I reckon Intermediate Slug would be about your limit.”

“Intermediate Slug?”

“It’s basically dribbling. You’d be a natural.”

Edwin was beginning to regret the fact that Stubby could talk. “I said I’m sorry. But if you’d told me all this before, I might have known how you felt.”

“That’s just the point. I couldn’t talk before. Not until we came here. I believe the house has something to do with it.”

“This house? How come?”

“I’m not sure, but think about it. Wychetts is old. Really old. It must have been built ages ago.”

Edwin nodded. “You mean in the seventies? When Mum was born?”

Stubby sighed and shook his little head. Edwin had never heard a rodent sigh before, and the sound was actually quite unnerving.

“The house is much older than your mother. And your grandmother, and even your great-grandmother’s grandmother. Wychetts was built hundreds of years ago.”

Edwin gazed at bedroom’s cracked walls, bowed floor and sagging ceiling. “I suppose you must be right. But I still don’t see what that has to do with you being able to talk.”

The mouse scuttled closer, lowering his voice to an almost imperceptible whisper. “I think this place has some kind of power.”

“No.” Edwin shook his head. “Hasn’t got any power. Or gas, for that matter. And the tap water looks a bit dodgy, too.”

Stubby sighed again, this time louder. “I don’t mean electricity, pea-brain. I’m talking about magic power. Magic that makes your wishes come true.”

“Magic?” Edwin threw his head back and laughed. “Oh don’t be ridiculous. And who are you calling pea-brain? You’re just a mouse. I’m a human. My head is twenty times bigger than yours.”

Stubby nodded. “Which would explain the rattling noise when you walk.”

“Huh?”

“There is a magic power in this place,” continued Stubby. “An ancient power that has lain here for centuries. A power that can be used for good. Or evil.”

“Oh come off it,” chuckled Edwin. “Don’t you think you’re being a bit over dramatic?”

A woman’s scream rang out from downstairs. Stubby’s ears swivelled. Edwin jumped out of his sleeping bag. “Mum!”

Bryony's Idea of Fun

Jane had said this was going to be fun.

As far as Bryony was concerned, fun was going to an amusement park, or a pop concert, or shopping with Mum. Fun was dancing and parties. Fun was playing games. Fun was laughing and joking and being excited.

Fun was not kneeling on hard stone floor with one hand wedged down a filthy old toilet.

“How’s it going?” asked Jane, who was busy de-weeding the sink.

“Fantastic.” Bryony made no effort to hide her sarcasm. “Can’t think of anything else I’d rather be doing. Except jumping off the Niagara Falls wearing concrete water wings.”

Jane smiled, and continued with her work.

Bryony’s arm was aching, so she sat back and took a well-earned breather. The toilet looked like it hadn’t been cleaned for centuries, and half an hour of scrubbing had made no difference at all.

“Don’t forget to do behind the back,” Jane reminded her. “I saw lots of cobwebs down there.”

“My arm hurts,” whined Bryony. “You do it.”

“But I’m doing the sink, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart.”

“I’m just trying to be friendly.”

“I told you not to bother.”

There was a long pause before Jane made another stab at conversation. “Bill, your father, tells me you’re keen to take up horse riding now we’ve moved to the country.”

Bryony gritted her teeth. “I know Bill is my father.”

“That wasn’t what I meant, darling.”

“And don’t call me darling, either. I am not your darling or your sweetheart, and I never will be. Got it?”

Jane’s smile looked more like a grimace as she tore a handful of dandelions from the sink. “Then what would you like me to call you?”

“Anything,” said Bryony, after giving the question due consideration. “As long as it’s from a very long way away.”

“That’s not very nice,” said Jane.

“I know.” Bryony nodded. “I wouldn’t have said it otherwise.”

Jane’s smile looked very forced, now. “I’d prefer it if you called me Mum, darl... I mean sweet... I mean Bryony.”

“But you’re not my mum.”

“I am in a way, now we’re living together as a family.”

“But I’ve already got a mum. A proper mum. So I don’t need another.”

Jane tossed an assortment of shredded weeds into a bucket, and then looked straight at Bryony.

“Being a mother is about more than blood. Being a mother is about caring and loving and being there when it counts.”

“So?” Bryony glared at Jane. “My mum cares about me and loves me and is there when it counts.”

“She’s in America. She has been for the last three years.” Jane set to work on the sink again.

“She still loves me,” said Bryony.

“Ah-huh.” There was something in that ‘ah-huh’ that gave the impression Jane didn’t believe her.

Bryony got angry. “That’s it. I’m not cleaning this stupid toilet anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jane. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I just want us to be friends, that’s all.”

“Then stop slagging off Mum.”

“I wasn’t slagging her off. I was only trying to ...” Jane bit her bottom lip, then smiled again. “I’ll clean behind the toilet if you like. You can finish the sink.”

“Whoopee,” breathed Bryony.

They swapped places. Bryony turned her back on Jane, taking her anger out on the stubborn plant-life that shared their bathing facilities. They worked in silence for a while, until...

“Eeeeeek!”

Bryony looked round and saw Jane shrinking back, face contorted with horror as she pointed at something behind the toilet. “It’s a spi... spi...”

“A spider?” Bryony didn’t see what the fuss was about. “So what?”

“I don’t like spiders,” squeaked Jane.

“Oh dear.” A grin broke across Bryony’s face. “Frightened, are we?”

Jane crouched there, shaking like a leaf. “Please... take it away...”

“I’m busy.” Bryony turned her attention back to the sink.

“Please...”

“Lots of work to do.”

“Please, Bryony...”

“OK. But only if you promise never to call me darling or sweetheart again.”

“I promise!”

“And to never bad-mouth my mum.”

“Yes, yes, whatever you want. Just get rid of it, please!”

Bryony left the sink, and then knelt to peer behind the toilet. From the fuss Jane was making she expected to see something the size of a tarantula, but the offending spider was no bigger than a pin-head.

“You’re such a wuss,” she laughed, reaching down to pluck the spider from its tangle of webs.

Jane shrieked again. “There’s another one!”

“That’s just a bit of fluff.”

“I saw it move!”

Jane had gone deathly pale, and her freckles stood out against her ashen skin. Bryony tossed the spider out of the broken window, wishing that a whole plague of the things would appear and drive Jane out of her life forever.

And no sooner had she wished it, than...

“Aaaaarrrrggghhhhhh!”

The scream pierced Bryony’s head like a speeding bullet. She wheeled round and saw a tide of tiny spiders oozing from behind the toilet. Jane just stood there, paralysed with fear and gasping for breath.

Bryony blinked, and wondered if she might be daydreaming. But more spiders came, advancing towards the petrified Jane in a tide of twitching eight-legged bodies.

Then Jane found her voice again. “Bryony! Do something!”

“I am.” Bryony folded her arms and leaned against the wall. “I’m watching. This is much more my idea of fun.”

Jane sobbed, and curled into a cringing ball as the spiders formed a circle around her. Bryony had never seen so many of the things, but couldn’t understand how anyone (even a wuss like Jane) could be so terrified of creatures that tiny. She wondered how Jane would react if something bigger came along...

There was a gurgling from the toilet, and something emerged from the dirty china bowl. It was a leg: a huge, segmented leg thicker than a broom handle.

Bryony staggered back, unable to believe what she was seeing. More massive legs emerged from the toilet, eight in total, followed by a bulbous body as big as a football.

Jane’s auburn head jerked up; her grey eyes widened, her lips twisted, and from the depths of her lungs came the loudest, most nerve shredding scream Bryony had ever heard...

Real Food

“Heeeeeellp! Edwiiiiinn!”

“I’m coming!” Edwin hared down the stairs, the rotten treads cracking noisily beneath his pounding feet. “Hold on, Mum!”

“Toilet,” said Stubby, perched on Edwin’s shoulder.

“Not now,” hissed Edwin. “Can’t you wait a minute?”

“I didn’t mean I need the toilet,” sighed the mouse. “I meant that’s where the screams are coming from.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Edwin jumped the last two steps, raced into the kitchen, and flung the bathroom door open.

Mum was in hysterics, hammering the floor with her fists and wailing like a baby. Bryony leaned against the wall, laughing gleefully.

“What have you done to her?” Edwin shot his step-sister an accusing glare before rushing to his mother.

And then he froze as he noticed the floor.

It was covered in spiders. Hundreds and thousands of them. No wonder Mum was so freaked.

“I’ll rescue you,” he vowed, grabbing a long handled mop that lay propped against the wall.

“You’ll need a bigger one than that,” chortled Bryony, pointing past his shoulder.

Edwin turned, and almost dropped the mop when he saw what sat on the toilet.

It was a spider, but larger than any spider he had seen before. Its legs were longer than his arms, and its swollen body bristled with hairs as thick as knitting needles.

“Not so brave now?” asked Bryony with a smirk.

Edwin raised the mop at the giant spider in a vaguely threatening manner. “Shoo,” he hissed. “Er... go away.”

The spider seized the mop in its pincer-like jaws, and crunched the handle as though it was balsa. Edwin retreated, but the spider’s beady eyes were fixed solely on the cowering Jane as it dropped nimbly to the floor.

“You’ve got to do something,” Edwin begged Stubby.

“Me? What can I do? I’m just a mouse.”

“Exactly. And mice eat spiders, right?”

“Invertebrates form part of our natural diet, yes.”

“And you said you were sick of left over sandwiches.”

Stubby stared at the spider with his black button eyes. “Yes, but I can’t eat all that. I’ve got to watch my figure, you know.”

Edwin realised it was a stupid thing to suggest. Stubby couldn't take on a spider that big unless he was the size of a Labrador.

If only he was...

Suddenly Stubby started growing: doubling, tripling, and quadrupling in size until he was too large to fit on Edwin's shoulder.

Bryony stopped laughing. She stared aghast at the ballooning body of the mouse as it toppled from Edwin and hit the floor with a hefty thud.

Stubby continued to grow, getting bigger and bigger until he was the size of a large dog.

"Get it!" ordered Edwin, recovering from his shock and pointing at the spider. "Go Stubby. Kill!"

Stubby obeyed, laughing joyfully as he pounced on the giant spider. "At last, real food!"

It was over in a matter of seconds. Stubby sank his huge incisors into the spider's body. Bryony covered her eyes and shuddered. Even Edwin, despite his relief, couldn't bear to watch. He turned away, trying to ignore the horrible crunching sound as he scurried to his mother's side.

"Mum, are you OK?"

Jane was trembling like a leaf in a gale. "Has it gone?" she croaked, face still buried in her hands.

“They all have,” said Edwin, realising that the floor was free from spiders.

Jane sobbed with relief. “Oh thank goodness. It was horrible, Edwin. I’ve never seen a spider that big.”

“There are no spiders now,” promised Edwin. “Nothing for you to be afraid of.” Then he nodded thankfully at Stubby. “Well done.”

“My pleasure,” said Stubby, using the tip of a giant spider leg to pick his teeth. “I presume a light sorbet to cleanse the pallet is out of the question?”

Jane smiled at Edwin. Then she looked up, saw the giant Stubby, screamed again, and fainted.

11 Inglenook

“Drink this,” said Bill, pressing a mug of lukewarm tea to Jane’s quivering lips.

“Thanks,” murmured Jane, slurping a mouthful and smiling gratefully at her husband. She lay on the kitchen floor, head resting on a rolled up sleeping bag. She had come round half an hour ago, but was still in a state of shock. Mind you, Bryony wasn’t feeling one hundred percent either.

Giant spiders were freaky enough. But dog-sized mice? That talked?

Not that she’d mentioned any of that to her father. Bill had only just returned, and although his concern for Jane was evident, it was equally obvious that he didn’t believe her story about giant spiders and mice the size of Labradors.

Which suited Bryony fine.

“You’ve been overdoing it,” crooned Bill, placing a hand on Jane’s forehead. “What you need is a nice lie down.”

“But the giant spider...”

Bill shook his head and brushed a wisp of ginger hair from Jane’s cheek. “There aren’t any giant spiders, sweetie-pops. You must have imagined it.”

“I didn’t imagine it.” Jane’s voice was unusually forceful. “I saw it. And that mouse. The children saw them, too.”

Bill looked up and met his daughter’s gaze. Bryony shook her head and shrugged. She expected Edwin to speak out in defence of his mother, but he too remained silent.

“But I saw them,” went on Jane, her cheeks flushing. “I’m not making this up. Why won’t you believe me?”

Bryony’s heart quickened. Were they going to have an argument? Please...

“Of course I believe you,” said Bill, in a way that suggested he didn’t believe her in the slightest. “Now you take a nice long rest. I’ve got to start renovation work.”

He pulled a blanket over Jane’s shoulders, kissed her forehead, then stood up and left the room. Bryony followed, tugging at his arm as they entered the hallway.

“She’s crazy, Dad. Off her rocker. I think you should get a doctor to look at her. She might have to go into a special hospital, and wear one of those funny jackets with no arms. She should probably have to stay there quite a long time. Ten years, maybe longer.”

“I don’t think so,” said Bill. “She’s just a bit stressed with all the excitement of the move. She’ll get over it. Now I must get on. The house won’t repair itself you know. Thought I’d start with that hole in your bedroom ceiling.”

Bill strode purposefully up the stairs. Moments later Bryony heard the sound of hammering from above, punctuated by the odd clank and the occasional “Ow!”

Finding herself at something of a loose end, she wandered into the lounge to view the damage caused by the collapsed ceiling. But instead she found her attention drawn to something at the end of the room.

She had forgotten all about the face behind the wall, and felt curious about it all of a sudden.

Bryony picked her way across the rubble-strewn floor to stand in front of the fireplace. In daylight those carved features didn’t seem so menacing. Cautiously, she reached up and rapped her knuckles on its wooden nose.

There was a dull knocking sound, but no other reaction.

Bryony breathed a relieved sigh. The face wasn’t alive. It couldn’t have been. It was all just her imagination.

“Why did you do it?” squealed a voice in her ear. “Mum’s petrified of spiders. She could have had a nervous breakdown.”

Bryony jumped, and spun round to see another set of ugly features staring at her.

“Well?” demanded Edwin. “I’m waiting for an explanation.”

“I didn’t do anything,” said Bryony. “It wasn’t my fault those spiders appeared from nowhere.”

“Oh but it was,” said the mouse (now thankfully returned to normal size) that emerged from Edwin’s pocket. “It was you who summoned those creatures.”

Bryony gave the rodent one of her hardest stares. “What are you talking about, big ears?”

“My ears are quite petit for a mouse. Yours are much bigger.”

“My ears are perfect,” said Bryony. “Just like my mother’s.”

The mouse stared back at her with shiny black button eyes. “Your mother is an elephant?”

“My mother is very beautiful,” seethed Bryony. “And I have inherited all her looks.”

“Oh I see,” said Stubby. “And there was me thinking you must have been chewing a wasp when the wind changed direction.”

Edwin laughed. Bryony gritted her teeth and put her hands on her hips. “So just what,” she enquired, “is this weird little freak of nature?”

“This is Edwin,” said the mouse. “I thought you knew that.”

Edwin stopped laughing, and glared at the mouse. “Hey, that’s not very...”

“I didn’t mean him,” sighed Bryony. “I meant you.”

“This is Stubby,” said Edwin, before the mouse could speak again. “He’s my friend.”

“Associate,” said Stubby. “There are parasitic worms in my stomach with which I share a greater sense of companionship.”

Edwin frowned at the mouse before continuing his explanation. “I found him in a dustbin. He was injured, so I nursed him back to health.”

“Is what you call it?” snorted Stubby. “Force feeding me mouldy left-overs, and making me listen to all your whining?”

“He doesn’t mean it,” said Edwin, hurriedly.

Bryony wrinkled her nose. “So you taught him to speak, too?”

“Don’t be silly,” sneered Edwin. “How could anyone teach a mouse to speak?”

“Let alone this idiot,” added Stubby. “The boy couldn’t teach a limpet to suck.”

“But Stubby can speak,” said Bryony. “So how come?”

“Because Edwin wished it,” said Stubby. “And what he wished came true. In the same way you summoned those spiders.”

“It’s magic,” said Edwin, in response to a puzzled look from Bryony. “At least that’s what Stubby thinks. He reckons Wychetts has some secret power. A power we can both tap into. I used it to make Stubby speak and grow, and you used it to conjure the spiders.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with the spiders,” insisted Bryony. “They just appeared.”

“That’s right,” said Stubby. “But only because you wanted them to. Think back. Didn’t you wish for it to happen?”

Bryony couldn’t deny that. “But I still don’t get it. This power, where does it come from?”

“It’s all around us,” explained Stubby, swivelling his bulbous ears. “It’s in every brick and every timber. Locked up in the very fabric of the building, as it has been for hundreds of years.”

“How did it get here?” asked Bryony.

“That I don’t know. But I think there may be someone here who does.”

“Who?” asked Bryony and Edwin together.

“Me,” said a voice from behind them. “I know the secret of the ancient power.”

The children turned in the direction of the voice. Bryony saw nobody, but a shrill squeal from Edwin made her notice the carved wooden face above the hearth.

Its eyes had opened, and they were staring right back at her.

“Who are you?” she asked, backing away.

The wooden mouth curved into a beaming smile. “I am Inglenook, Keeper of Magic. And your wish is my command.”

Mice Are Always Right

Inglenook's voice was soft and deep, and reminded Bryony of creaking timbers. But that might have been because when he spoke, the whole house seemed to reverberate with the sound.

"So you are alive," breathed Edwin, emerging from behind Bryony. "But what are you?"

There was a loud cracking noise as the face's smile broadened into a grin. "As I told you, I am the Keeper of Magic."

Bryony pulled a face. "Magic?"

"The magic of all things. The magic of the earth and the sky, the sun and the moon. The magic that is yours to command. Now what is it you wish of me, young Masters?"

Bryony swapped a puzzled glance with Edwin. "This doesn't make sense," she whispered. "Fireplaces aren't supposed to talk."

"Neither are mice," Edwin reminded her. "Looks like Stubby was right."

"Of course I was right," tutted Stubby. "Mice are always right. It's just that humans never listen to a word we say."

“That’s because you can’t normally speak,” Bryony reminded him.

“Oh yes,” said Stubby. “There is that, sorry.”

Edwin edged warily to within a stride of the wooden face. “This magic of yours, how did it get here?”

“The magic is not mine,” answered Inglenook. “I am merely a custodian. The magic was breathed into this building by the Wise Ones.”

“Wise Ones?” Bryony shook her head. “Who were they when they were at home?”

Inglenook seemed more than happy to explain. “The Wise Ones built Wychetts, as a repository for their magic powers.”

“A repo what?” asked Bryony.

“A repository,” said Edwin, relishing the fact that he knew a word Bryony didn’t. “It means a place to store stuff.”

Bryony nodded slowly. “So Wychetts was built by these Wise Ones as a place to store their magic?” She gazed at the cracking walls and crumbled ceiling. “Bit of a botch job, if you ask me. They should have got professionals in.”

“Wychetts was constructed many hundreds of years ago,” said Inglenook, a hint of pride in his deep voice. “It was not always as you see it now.”

“So what happened?” asked Edwin. “How come the house is in such a state? And why were you bricked up behind a wall?”

Inglenook sighed, and for a moment it felt like the whole house would fall down.

“In the Old Times, everyone believed in magic. But as the years passed, men looked elsewhere for answers, to machines and to what they called ‘science’. Man no longer wished to live in harmony with the earth, but to master it instead. Eventually no one believed in magic. Not even the descendants of the Wise Ones. It was then the Shadow Clan seized their chance and took over.”

Edwin frowned. “Who were the Shadow Clan?”

“Bad people,” said Inglenook, sadly. “A coven of evil witches and wizards who sought to master Wychetts’ power for their own selfish ends. They seized the house by force, and slew the last of the Wise Ones who dwelt here.”

“That’s horrible.” Bryony grimaced, and clasped her hands to her chest.

Inglenook sighed in agreement. “But Wychetts’ magic cannot be stolen, it can only be given. The Shadow Clan could make no use of me, so they entombed me instead, leaving the house to crumble and decay.”

Edwin gasped. “They just bricked you up? How cruel is that?”

“It is no matter.” Inglenook smiled again. “Because now you two Wise Ones have come to awaken me.”

“But we’re not Wise Ones,” said Edwin.

“Speak for yourself,” said Bryony, who was more than happy to accept such a title.

“To be precise,” continued Inglenook, “you are both descendants of the ancient Wise Ones, and as such were always destined to become Guardians of Wychetts.”

“So we’re Guardians, too.” Edwin shrugged. “What does that mean?”

“It means you may use Wychetts’ power,” said Inglenook. “The magic of the Wise Ones is yours to command.”

Bryony’s dark eyes widened. “The magic is mine to command?”

“Ours,” Edwin reminded her. “It’s ours to command, right Inglenook?”

“That is so,” agreed Inglenook. “Now what is it you wish of me?”

“It’s freezing in here,” said Bryony, eager to put Inglenook’s words to the test. “How about a nice fire?”

The words had scarcely left her lips when the hearth beneath the wooden face blossomed into flame.

“Cool!” gasped Edwin.

“As you wish,” said Inglenook. The fire went out, and a freezing gale blew flakes of snow down the chimney.

“That w-w-wasn’t w-w-what I m-m-meant,” stammered Edwin, wiping frost from his eyelashes. “P-p-please c-c-can you m-m-make it w-w-wwarm ag-g-g-gain?”

Inglenook obliged, and once more the room was bathed in heat. “Will there be anything else?”

Bryony could think of all sorts of things, but Edwin beat her to it. “Can I have a hamburger?”

“Eat in or take away?” asked Inglenook.

“Eat in, please.”

A hamburger appeared in Edwin’s hand. “Wow, now that’s what I call fast food.” Edwin bit into the burger, and then promptly spat it out. “Ugh!”

“What is wrong?” asked Inglenook, his deep voice edged with concern.

“Gherkins,” grumbled Edwin.

“Don’t be rude to him,” hissed Bryony, shooting Edwin a reproachful look.

“I meant it’s got gherkins in it. I don’t like gherkins.”

“I apologise,” said Inglenook. “But the young Master did not specify the precise ingredients. Next time I shall ensure there are no gherkins present.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Edwin, breaking into a grin. “I still think it’s brilliant. Want a bite?”

“No way.” Bryony recoiled as Edwin offered her the hamburger. “Anyway, we shouldn’t be wishing for dumb things like burgers. How about money and stuff?”

Inglenook’s wooden features creased into a frown. “I am unable to grant requests for personal wealth. The Wise Ones forbade such things.”

“Shows you how wise they were,” huffed Bryony. Then she had another idea. “But what if I asked you to send me somewhere. Could you do that?”

“It would all depend on where,” said Inglenook. “Does the young Mistress have a location in mind?”

Of course Bryony did.

“America. Can you send me to America?”

“Indeed,” replied Inglenook. “Straightforward transportation spells are simple enough to perform.”

“Woo-hooh!” Bryony clapped her hands together. “How long will that take?”

“I can get you there in one minute,” said Inglenook. “Depending on air traffic and prevailing wind direction.”

“So do it,” demanded Bryony. “I want to go to America. Now.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” asked Edwin, knowing what Bryony had in mind. “America is a very large place. Is there a particular part of America you want to visit? I mean, have you got an address in mind?”

“Well of course I...” Bryony’s voice trailed off. “No, I don’t have an address. But Inglenook can take me to where I want to go, even without an address. Can’t you, Inglenook?”

“Um...” Inglenook frowned again. “An address would be helpful. Otherwise...”

“You could end up anywhere in America,” said Edwin.

“I’m willing to take that chance,” said Bryony. “And if it isn’t where I want to go, I’ll get Inglenook to try again. And again, and again until I find the right address.”

Inglenook cleared his throat. “I’m afraid that will not be possible, young Mistress. A Guardian may only use Wychetts’ magic when they are within the walls of the cottage. Once in you are America, I will not be able to grant your wishes.”

“Says who?” demanded Bryony.

“The Wise Ones,” said Inglenook. “It was one of the safety measures they put in place to stop the Guardians abusing their power.”

“So you can’t do it.” Bryony felt like crying. Then, as the tears threatened to burst from her eyes, she had another idea. “Instead, what if I wished for someone to come here?”

“That may be possible,” said Inglenook, coyly. “It would all depend on...”

“I want my mum,” said Bryony. “Can you bring her here?”

Inglenook hesitated. “That may not be straightforward.”

“But you said the power was mine to command.”

“Ours,” Edwin reminded Bryony.

“Indeed I did,” answered Inglenook. “But I may not transport people against their will.”

“This is my mum we’re talking about. Of course she’ll want to come here.” Bryony glared demandingly at Inglenook.

“I want my mum and I want her now. I command you!”

The sound of knocking echoed down the hallway.

“Mum!” A screaming Bryony pushed Edwin aside as she hared from the room. “Muuuuuuuum!”

The Man From The Council

“Muuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuum!”

Bryony sprinted down the hall, through the still door-less arched doorway, and threw herself at the person standing outside the cottage.

“Mum!” She wrapped her arms around the visitor and squeezed with all her might. “Oh Mum! I’m so glad you... huh?”

Bryony’s mother, or rather the person Bryony thought was her mother, gave her a long cold stare.

“Would you mind taking your hands off me?” he pleaded in a croaky voice.

Bryony obliged and stepped back, her curious gaze sweeping the visitor from head to foot. He was a strange looking man, with a large beak of a nose and hardly any chin at all. What remained of his hair was an unnatural jet-black colour, a few strands of which were combed across his balding crown. His eyes were a piercing silver-grey, but looked somehow too small for his head. He wore a tatty dark suit, with frayed collar and cuffs that reminded Bryony of feathers.

“Who are you?” she asked. “And what have you done with my mum?”

The man looked confused, and was about to reply when Bryony spotted movement over his left shoulder. She pushed him aside, and saw a slim, blonde haired woman striding towards her.

“Muuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuummm!”

Bryony launched herself at the second visitor, but the woman sidestepped her embrace, and Bryony ended up face down on the ground.

“Oh dear,” said a soft, purring voice. “You seem to have fallen over. Let me help you.”

A slender, brown-gloved hand hooked around Bryony’s arm. Bryony stood up and smiled her thanks at the woman, who she now realised wasn’t her mother.

But she was just as beautiful, with high cheekbones, luscious pink lips and a delicate little nose. Her blonde hair was cut in a stylish bob, and shimmered like gold in the morning sunshine. She wore a chic creamy coat, a pair of trendy chocolate coloured boots, and a gorgeous necklace studded with diamonds, their sparkle more than matched by her luminous emerald eyes.

“Oh dear,” said the woman, noticing Bryony’s hand. “You’ve cut yourself.”

The scratch marks had faded, but were still very visible. “It’s nothing,” said Bryony. “Some stupid cat took a swipe at me. But I’ll get it back, don’t you worry.”

Bryony tore her gaze from the beautiful lady and peered down the garden, but there was no sign of any further arrivals. “Where’s my mum? Inglenook said...”

“Inglenook?” The woman frowned. “Who is Inglenook?”

Bryony was about to explain, then thought better of it. Talking wooden faces that granted wishes sounded kind of dumb, and she didn’t want to look an idiot in front of such a cool, elegant lady.

“What’s going on here?” Bryony’s father emerged from the cottage, wielding a hack-saw. “Oh, hello.” He smiled when he noticed the man and the woman. “Didn’t know we had visitors. What can I do for you?”

“My name is Dawes,” said the big nosed man in the tatty dark suit. “Mr Jack Dawes. And this,” he gestured to the blonde haired woman, “is my assistant, Miss Katya Pouncefoot.”

Bryony didn’t know why, but she had a strange feeling she had met Mr Dawes and Miss Pouncefoot before.

“I’m Mr Platt,” said Bill. “And this is my daughter Bryony.”

“That is a pretty name,” purred Katya, her green eyes swivelling back to Bryony. “And such a pretty creature, too.”

Bryony’s cheeks reddened. She never minded being called pretty (it didn’t happen often enough, as far as she was concerned) but to be called so by such a beautiful woman was a real compliment; even if she was a bit dubious about the ‘creature’ bit.

“Pleased to meet you both,” said a beaming Bill. “So to what do we owe the pleasure? Only, I’m right in the middle of some complicated carpentry, and to be honest I need some practice with my new hammer here.”

“That is a saw,” said Mr Dawes.

“It is?” A frowning Bill examined the tool he was holding. “That’ll explain why it took so long to cut the wood with that long handled blunty thing.”

“I can see you are busy,” said Mr Dawes. “But hopefully this will only take a few moments. We are representatives of the Local Council.”

Bill jumped. “Council?” For some reason Bryony couldn’t fathom, her father’s face suddenly turned a funny colour.

Mr Dawes nodded, his tiny grey eyes darting across the decrepit cottage. “It has come to our attention that you have recently purchased this property, and are considering modifications to its structure.”

Bill nodded. "I'm going to repair it, yes. But how did you..."

"I trust you are aware that, before any such works are undertaken, consent must be obtained from the Council Planning Department?"

"Of course," said Jane, appearing from the cottage behind Bill. "My husband must have submitted a planning application. Haven't you, darling?"

Bryony's father coughed, and fiddled with his collar. "Er... um... well, I was thinking of getting round to it at some point, but..."

"No matter," said Mr Dawes. "If you would care to show me the plans you have for the intended works, I'm sure the Council will be amenable to your desired modifications."

"Plans?" Bill looked confused.

"Indeed." Mr Dawes frowned. "Surely you have prepared diagrams detailing the proposed development?"

Bill's confused expression hardened into one of shock. "Diagrams? Er... well, I haven't really had time for things like that."

Mr Dawes didn't seem impressed. "The Council cannot consider redevelopment proposals without plans, Mr Platt."

More collar fiddling from Bryony's father. "How about if you give me a little while to get them drawn up? I think I've got some crayons somewhere..."

"That isn't possible," croaked Mr Dawes. "Time is running out. You see the Council has received a number of complaints relating to this property."

"Complaints?" Bill frowned. "Who from?"

"Neighbours," said Mr Dawes.

"We don't have any neighbours." Jane gestured around them at the empty fields. "There aren't any houses for miles."

Mr Dawes ignored Jane's observation. "The house is near derelict, and is a serious health and safety issue. Further to that, it is a blot on the landscape. It is the Council's opinion that the cottage should be demolished."

"But you can't do that," gasped Bill. "This house is of special historic interest."

"Who told you that?" asked Mr Dawes.

"The man who sold it to me."

"And who might that have been?"

Bill shrugged. "Don't know. Never got his name. Only ever spoke to him on the phone. Sounded a bit like you, actually. Sort of croaky voice..."

“You didn’t get his name?” Now it was Jane who looked appalled. “You bought a house from someone and you didn’t take their name?”

Bryony’s heart skipped a beat. At long last it looked like they were going to argue.

Mr Dawes cut in before Bill could respond. “I am a busy man and will get straight to the point. The Council served a demolition notice on the previous owner of this property because he failed to maintain it to a reasonable standard. The demolition is due at midday today.”

“Today?” Bill and Jane shrieked the word in unison.

Mr Dawes nodded. “And because you have failed to prove to me that you will be able to repair this building to a satisfactory standard, I have no choice but to allow demolition to proceed as planned.”

“You can’t do that,” wailed Bill. “We won’t have a home.”

“Then you’ll just have to build a new one,” said Mr Dawes. “Not here, of course. It’s a designated area of outstanding natural beauty. But I’m sure you’ll find a convenient spot somewhere else. Subject to the usual planning consents, of course.”

Bill shook his head. “But I don’t have enough money to build a new house. Not here, not anywhere...”

“Oh Bill,” cried Jane. “Why didn’t you check this out before you bought the cottage?”

“Don’t blame me,” said Bill. “Solicitors are supposed to do that sort of thing.”

“And did you use a solicitor?”

“Yes, of course I did.” Then Bill thought about it for a bit. “Well, no, actually I didn’t. Thought it would be cheaper if I carried out all the legal negotiations myself.”

“Oh Bill,” wailed Jane. “What have you done? All our money thrown away!”

Bryony exploded with laughter. As far as she was concerned this was all fantastic news. “So we don’t have to spend another night in this grotty old tip? Cool!”

“Mr Dawes,” said Bill, clasping his hands together in that praying gesture of his. “Forget about the plans. How about if I give you a quick tour of the house? I’ll tell you what I intend to do. I’ll convince you that Wychetts can be restored to its former glory.”

Mr Dawes stared at Bill for several seconds, and then his tiny grey eyes flickered to his personal assistant.

“I think that would be a very good idea,” said Miss Pouncefoot. “If you agree, Mr Dawes?”

The man from the Council nodded. “Very well. I think it only fair to give you every possible chance, Mr Platt.”

Bryony's heart sank.

“Great.” Bill grinned and clapped his hands together. “Follow me.”

Bill dived back into the house, dragging a shocked looking Jane with him. Mr Dawes glanced at Miss Pouncefoot, and then followed. Bryony remained outside with the blonde haired woman.

“It would be such a shame if the house was destroyed,” said Miss Pouncefoot, gazing sadly at the cottage. “Older houses have so much character. So much magic.”

“Magic?” Suddenly Bryony had an idea. “That’s it! Why didn’t I think of it before?”

“Think of what?” asked Miss Pouncefoot.

But Bryony was sprinting back into the cottage...

Bryony galloped down the hallway, and bumped into Edwin coming from the other direction.

“Out of my way,” she ordered, trying to push him aside.

“What’s up?” Edwin stood his ground. “Who’s that with your dad? It’s not your mum, is it?”

“Of course not, dimwit. That’s Mr Dawes from the Council. He’s going to demolish the house, unless Dad convinces him otherwise. It’s a health and safety issue, and a blot on the landscape.”

Edwin nodded. “I’ve always thought that about your dad.”

Bryony scowled. “I meant the house, idiot.”

“Oh.” Edwin nodded again. “I suppose that figures. So we’d have to move somewhere else?”

“Dad can’t afford another house. He spent all his money on this shack.”

“The berk. So what will we do?”

“I’ll go and live with my mum. You can live in a cardboard box for all I care.”

Edwin’s eyes widened. “Is my mum mad at him?”

Bryony grinned. “Madder than I’ve ever seen her before.”

“Great. They might get a divorce.” Edwin punched the air with delight, then froze. “But what if your dad convinces Mr Dawes to call off the demolition?”

“He won’t,” said Bryony. “I’ll see to that.”

“How?”

“Magic, that’s how. I’m going to make lots of nasty things happen.”

“And the house will get demolished?”

“That’s the plan.”

Edwin frowned. “But what about Inglenook?”

“Fat lot of good he is,” snorted Bryony. “He can’t send me to Mum and he can’t bring her here. A bulldozer is the best thing for him. And I’m going to make sure the demolition goes ahead.”

“Is that wise?” asked Stubby, emerging from Edwin’s pocket. “You don’t yet understand the nature of the power bestowed upon you.”

Bryony shot the mouse a fearsome glare. “I didn’t ask for your opinion, goofy.”

“Wait,” said Edwin, as Bryony pushed past him. “I’m going to help you.”

Bryony wheeled back to face Edwin, her dark eyes narrow with suspicion. “Why would you want to help me?”

“We want the same thing,” explained Edwin. “And think about it: together we can make twice as many nasty things happen.”

Bryony chewed her bottom lip as she considered the proposition. She realised Edwin was probably right. But there was a problem.

“You mean we become...” Bryony struggled to say the word. “Friends?”

“No way,” said Edwin. “Let’s call it a temporary truce. So what do you say?”

“OK.” Bryony nodded. “A truce it is. But it’s only temporary, right?”

“Only temporary,” agreed Edwin. “So what do we do first?”

“I suggest you do think about this for a second,” warned Stubby. “For two reasons. Firstly, thinking should prove a novel experience for you both. Secondly, meddling with Wychetts’ power is dangerous. You have no idea what could happen as a consequence.”

“I know what will happen if we do nothing,” said Bryony. “I’ll end up stuck in this hovel forever, with sippy pants here and his stupid smiley mother.”

“And I’ll have to put up with Brownie Splatt,” responded Edwin. “And her stupid gormless father.”

Stubby groaned. “If you had one extra brain cell between you, you could just about qualify as a cabbage patch. Why won’t you listen to me? Why won’t you...”

“Let’s get started,” said Edwin, stuffing a protesting Stubby back into his pocket.

Bryony nodded, and set off down the hallway. She was so going to enjoy this.

Death Trap

“And this will be the study,” announced Bill, leading Mr Dawes into the dingy, cramped little room.

“Dining room,” said Jane, following close behind.

Mr Dawes looked confused. “Which is it to be? Dining room or study?”

“We haven’t decided,” said Bill.

“But I thought we agreed,” hissed Jane. “This is to be the dining room.”

Bryony and Edwin crouched in the hallway, peering through the door. They looked at each other and smiled. Perhaps, thought Bryony, they weren’t going to need magic after all.

But Bill relented. “Oh yes, I was forgetting. This will be the dining room.”

All that seemed irrelevant to the man from the Council. “I can smell damp.” Mr Dawes walked to the nearest wall and pointed to a large brown stain. “See, you have significant damp penetration in your lower levels.”

“It’s just a small patch,” Bill assured him. “It’s not as though the place is dripping wet.”

Bryony made a wish.

A bucket load of water came from nowhere and splashed all over Mr Dawes.

“The wall might not be dripping,” spluttered the man from the Council. “But I am!”

Bill looked puzzled. “I don’t know where that came from. I’m sorry, but I assure you the damp problem can be easily rectified.”

Mr Dawes was about to reply when another deluge of water came down on him. This time it had bits of seaweed and small fish in it. Bryony stifled a giggle and glanced at the guilty party. Edwin beamed back at her, proud of his handiwork.

Mr Dawes pulled a wriggling sprat from his left ear, and glared at Bill with his tiny grey eyes. “I have never seen the like in all my years. This is beyond repair, Mr Platt.”

Bill took the fish and examined it. “There’s obviously slightly more damp than I thought, but let me show you the rest of the house before you make any hasty decisions.” He handed the fish to a perplexed looking Jane, before leading Mr Dawes from the room. “This way, please.”

Bryony and Edwin followed at a discreet distance, smirking at each other as Bill ushered Mr Dawes into the

kitchen. “Now I know it doesn’t look much at the moment, but I intend to install brand new integral units and...”

Mr Dawes cut Bill off mid sentence. “See those cracks on the wall? They are sure signs of structural movement. The land round here is renowned for its instability.”

“Unstable?” Bill smiled and shook his head. “I think you’re being a smidgen over dramatic. This ground is as solid as rock.” He stamped his foot on the floor, and the ground beneath his feet turned to jelly.

“My God,” gasped Mr Dawes, struggling to remain on his feet. “What’s happening?”

“Nothing to worry about,” said Bill, clinging to the wall for support. “It’s probably just a passing train.”

“But there isn’t a railway line for miles,” croaked Mr Dawes.

“It might have got lost.”

“Lost? How can a train get loooooo...”

Suddenly the walls turned to jelly too, and the room resembled a bouncy castle. Bill and Mr Dawes yelled as their bodies bounced up and down.

Jane came running from the dining room. “Oh Bill! Wait there, I’ll...”

She tried to reach her husband, but ended up bouncing right in to Mr Dawes, who fell on his back and bounced up again with a startled scream.

Bryony and Edwin laughed, and performed a triumphant high five. Suddenly all the bouncing stopped and the room became solid again.

Bill picked himself up, and helped Jane to her feet. “Look Mr Dawes,” he began, but then realised his visitor was nowhere in sight. “Mr Dawes?”

“I’m up here,” croaked a voice from above. Looking up, Bryony saw a pair of skinny legs sticking out from a hole in the ceiling.

“Oh I see,” said Bill. “Decided to explore upstairs, have you? Wait up, I won’t be a second.”

Bill hurried from the room and up the rickety stairs. Not willing to miss out on another golden opportunity, Bryony and Edwin followed.

By the time they reached the landing, a dusty Mr Dawes was standing next to Bill and pointing up at the roof. “You’ve got more problems here,” he advised. “The thatch has rotted through, and the roof trusses are riddled with woodworm.”

“I wouldn’t say riddled,” countered Bill. “There’s the odd spot of minor infestation, but it’s not as if the things are dropping out of the woodwork.”

A tangled mass of slimy, squirming worms fell with a splat onto Mr Dawes' bald head.

"Nice one," said Edwin to Bryony.

"Your turn next," she replied with a snigger.

Mr Dawes flicked the worms from his forehead and glared at Bill again. "The whole roof structure will need replacing. Every beam, every truss, every straw of thatch. From top to bottom, every square inch of this house has something wrong with it. I therefore have no choice but to proceed with demolition."

"But you can't do that," whined Bill. "It has so much potential. And don't forget how old it is. Surely our heritage is worth preserving?"

The man from the Council obviously didn't think so, brushing past Bryony and Edwin before descending the creaky stairs. "The only thing I'm worried about preserving is my life, which is why I'm getting out of this death trap as quickly as possible."

"Wait," implored Bill. "Take a moment to look at the stairs. Surely a man of your knowledge can appreciate such a wonderful example of ancient craftsmanship?"

Mr Dawes tapped his foot on the tread. "They don't feel very stable."

“Nonsense,” said Bill. “These stairs are as stable as the day they were built.”

Edwin winked at Bryony. Suddenly the stairs turned into a helter-skelter, and Mr Dawes slipped and went hurtling down at great speed to crash into Jane, who was carrying a bucket of water containing rescued fish from the dining room. The water went everywhere, but mostly over the man from the Council.

Lying in a puddle of flopping fish, Mr Dawes croaked and spluttered with fury. It was odd, but Bryony thought his raucous cries that reminded her of a bird.

In the blink of an eye the fish disappeared and the stairs became stairs again. Bill hurried down and helped Mr Dawes to his feet. “I’m so sorry,” he gushed, patting Mr Dawes’ sodden jacket. “I really don’t know how that happened.”

“Me neither,” snapped Mr Dawes. “But I know what will happen next. Bulldozers at noon.”

“But wait,” begged Jane. “You haven’t seen the face yet.”

“Face?” Mr Dawes paused. “What face?”

“The fireplace,” said Bill. “It’s a real work of art. I’m sure you’ll change your mind once you’ve seen it.”

Bill and Jane shepherded Mr Dawes down the hallway. Bryony and Edwin hurried down the stairs and followed the grown-ups into the lounge.

They were surprised to see that Miss Pouncefoot was already there.

“Look at this,” she purred, gesturing at Inglenook’s carved wooden features. “Isn’t he a handsome fellow?”

“I think it was some sort of charm,” said Jane. “To keep out evil.”

Miss Pouncefoot flinched. “Or it could be purely decorative. Whatever its purpose, such a feature is surely worth preserving, Mr Dawes?”

Mr Dawes studied the face closely. “A noteworthy example of medieval carving, admittedly. But not enough on its own to warrant saving the property. I’m sorry, Mr and Mrs Platt, but I have no choice but to proceed with the destruction of the property.”

“But you can’t do that,” wailed Bill. “All my money is tied up in this place.”

“All our money,” Jane corrected him. “Mr Dawes, what if we asked for more time? Why don’t you give us a few weeks to sort things out?”

“Weeks?” Mr Dawes gave a derisory croak. “Such work would take years, and that’s if it was carried out by someone who knew the difference between a hack-saw and a hammer.”

“I’ve got sticky tape,” said Bill, as though that fact might change Mr Dawes’ mind.

“It will take more than sticky tape,” said Mr Dawes. “Your only option is to sell the property to someone who can afford to restore it properly.”

“Sell it?” Bill shook his head. “And what sort of nincompoop would buy a rotten, damp infested shack like this?”

“You did,” said Jane, folding her arms.

Bryony grinned at Edwin again. This had gone much better than she’d dared hope.

Mr Dawes strode from the lounge. “The inspection is over. I suggest you and your family vacate the premises by eleven thirty. Come, Miss Pouncefoot.”

Miss Pouncefoot followed her superior from the room, and smiled at Bryony as she walked passed. Bryony smiled back, but couldn’t help thinking there was something strange about the beautiful blonde haired woman. Mr Dawes, too.

Curious, she walked to the lounge door and peered down the hallway. There was no sign of Miss Pouncefoot or Mr Dawes, but she thought she saw a long, cream coloured tail disappearing through the front doorway. And was that a ragged black bird fluttering skywards?

Strange, the pair of them. Strange and yet somehow familiar. Bryony was trying to work out how, when a loud shriek interrupted her thoughts.

“This is all your fault,” said Jane, aiming a trembling finger at Bill. “I knew I should have listened to my mother. She said you were a waste of space. She said I should never have married you.”

“It isn’t my fault,” protested Bill. “How was I to know the place was going to be demolished? Come now, be reasonable sweetie-bubs.”

“Don’t call me sweetie-bubs,” snarled Jane, before bursting into tears. “I hate those silly names! And I hate you!”

“But wait,” called Bill, rushing after Jane as she fled through the door. “Please, puppy-pops! Don’t get angry....”

Bryony and Edwin executed another high-five.

“Mission accomplished,” beamed Bryony.

“One hundred percent success,” agreed Edwin. “We made quite a good team.”

“I don’t know what you both look so pleased about,” said Stubby, poking his head out of Edwin’s pocket again. “Don’t you realise what you’ve done?”

“Of course we do,” laughed Edwin. “We’ve saved ourselves from a life of misery.”

Stubby sighed. “And in so doing have sentenced Wychetts to destruction.”

Bryony shrugged carelessly. “Sorry, but it’s for the greater good.”

“Couldn’t be helped,” agreed Edwin. “The main thing is that we both got what we wanted.”

“Typical humans,” tutted the mouse. “Always thinking of themselves.”

“Do not be too harsh on them,” said Inglenook, suddenly coming to life again. “They are young in years, but in time they will learn to use the power for good.”

“But that’s just it,” groaned Stubby. “There won’t be any power for them to use once the bulldozers have given you a going over. Honestly, for someone so wise you’re a right proper thicko.”

“He is made of wood,” pointed out Bryony.

“Do not fret,” said Inglenook, his voice as calm as ever. “I trust the young Masters. They are descendants of the Wise Ones. Eventually they will know the truth of all things.”

“But there won’t be an eventually,” squealed Stubby. “There won’t be anything after midday. Don’t you understand, balsa brains? You’re going to be demolished. Knocked down. Flattened like a pancake and ground into dust.”

The carved features crinkled into a thoughtful expression. “But perhaps it is better to be destroyed than fall under the power of the Shadow Clan.”

“And what would happen then?” asked Edwin.

“The world as we know it would end,” explained Inglenook. “Fire would rain from the sky, continents would collapse in on themselves and swallow the oceans, every life form on the planet would either perish or face eternal enslavement. And there will be a world-wide shortage of ice-cream.”

“That’s awful,” gasped Bryony, scarcely able to believe what she’d just heard. “Even mint choc chip?”

“Even mint choc chip,” revealed Inglenook, gravely.

“But what about the safeguards?” said Edwin. “You won’t let us use Wychetts’ power for personal gain, so surely the same rule applies to the likes of this Shadow Clan?”

“Such rules were made for Guardians,” explained Inglenook. “The measures put in place by the Wise Ones could never stop the Shadow Clan from carrying out their destructive plans. It is the job of the Guardians to ensure the likes of the Shadow Clan never seize power in the first place.”

Edwin stared at Inglenook. “But the Shadow Clan won’t take control of your power. Will they?”

“They’d have to act pretty quick if they want to,” said Stubby. “By my reckoning they’ve got another hour and a half before the demolition squad turns up.”

An hour and a half? Edwin suddenly felt uneasy. Inglenook’s words had made him think.

He was a Guardian. He was supposed to protect Wychetts; instead he was responsible for its destruction.

Well, at least partly.

He turned round to voice his concerns to Bryony, but she had already left the room.

Who Needs TV

“Not your fault?” Jane’s strained voice echoed through the cottage. “How can you say it’s not your fault? You’re the one who bought this place. You’re the one who invested all our money. You’re the one who gambled everything...”

“But I wasn’t to know,” pleaded Bill.

“I thought you knew everything. At least that’s what you always make out. I must have been insane to let you buy a house without involving me.”

“You’re right about that,” snorted Bill. “Sane people don’t see giant mice and spiders in the bathroom.”

“Sane people don’t buy crumbling old ruins from people they don’t know the name of. Without hiring a solicitor!”

Bryony had already packed in readiness to leave. She sat on her suitcase in the kitchen, smiling as she listened to the grown-ups arguing upstairs. It had been going on for over an hour, and was getting juicier by the second. She hadn’t had this much fun for ages. Who needed TV?

“Then you should have said something earlier,” retorted Bill. “Instead of going along with everything and smiling like a deranged Cheshire cat.”

“How dare you speak to me like that? It’s no wonder your first wife left you for the office cleaner.”

“He was a Hygienic Cleansing Executive,” said Bill.

The argument raged on. Bryony glanced at her wristwatch and noted the time. Eleven thirty. Only half an hour till the demolition squad turned up. Only half an hour, and then she would be gone from this horrible place forever.

She caught movement over her shoulder, and saw Edwin’s freckly face peering round the door.

“Have you been listening to our parents?” Bryony grinned at Edwin. “Great, isn’t it? I’d been hoping they’d have a row for ages.”

Edwin didn’t return her smile as he stepped into the kitchen. “Bryony, I’ve been thinking.”

“First time for everything I suppose.”

“I’ve been thinking about Inglenook and Wychetts. We can’t let the Council knock the house down. It wouldn’t be right. We’re Guardians. We’re supposed to look after the place.”

“I don’t care about Wychetts,” said Bryony.

“But Stubby said...”

“And I don’t care what that stupid mouse thinks, either.”

Edwin put a hand to his shirt pocket, which Bryony saw was empty.

“Stubby’s gone,” he whispered, answering her questioning look. “Run away.”

“Then perhaps he’s not so stupid after all.”

“I’m worried the cat might have got him.”

“Then I feel more pity for the cat. Must have terrible indigestion by now.”

“That isn’t funny.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care about Stubby, and I don’t care about this house. I’ll be leaving soon, and I won’t see either of them again. Nor you, for that matter.”

Edwin folded his arms. “Your dad doesn’t have any money. Where will you go?”

“To Mum. My real Mum.”

“You think she’d take you in?”

“Of course. She won’t let her own daughter starve in the streets. I’m sure she’d even take Dad back, too. It’ll be just like the old days.”

“Will it?” Edwin didn’t seem so sure of that. “But how will you even contact your mum? You don’t have her address.”

“No. But Dad does. He just won’t tell me, for some reason.”

Edwin nodded. “Maybe it’s because he doesn’t want anything to do with her. And he doesn’t want you to have anything to do with her, either.”

“Go away,” hissed Bryony, her temper snapping. “You don’t know anything about my mum.”

Edwin stayed where he was. “I might know more than you think.”

Bryony scowled at him. “Like what?”

Edwin took a step closer. “Your stupid dad left his coat at our flat the other week.”

That didn’t surprise Bryony. “Dad’s always leaving stuff everywhere. It’s just as well his head’s bolted on because he’d leave that lying around as well. Not that it would be much of a loss. Anyway, what about his coat?”

“I found something in one of the pockets.”

Bryony was horrified. “You went through my dad’s pockets?”

“Just making sure he wasn’t a spy.”

“Eh?”

Edwin smiled slyly. “Don’t you want to know what I found?”

Bryony shrugged. “Knowing my dad it was probably just a dirty old handkerchief.”

“There was that, yes. And a half eaten sausage roll. And a gooey lumpy thing I’m still trying to identify. But there was something else, too.”

Bryony didn’t like the look in Edwin’s eyes. “Like what?” she asked, a nervous edge to her voice.

“A letter,” said Edwin. “From your beloved mother.”

“A letter from mum?” Bryony gasped. “To me?”

“To your father,” revealed Edwin. “But guess what. It had her address on it.”

“Her address!” Bryony shrieked and scrambled to her feet. “What else did she say? Where’s the letter now?”

“I have it.” Edwin took a step backwards. “Would you like to see it?”

“Of course I would,” said Bryony. “Give it to me.”

Edwin pretended to consider her request. “What’s the magic word?”

Bryony gritted her teeth. “Give it to me. Please.”

“No,” said Edwin.

“But...”

“I know your mum’s address.” Edwin chuckled as he backed away towards the door. “And I’m never going to tell you. Never in a million years.”

“And I’ve got Stubby,” blurted Bryony.

“Huh?” Edwin froze.

“I kidnapped him,” lied Bryony, amazed at her ability to think on her feet. “Would you like me to give him back to you?”

“Yes.” Edwin’s triumphant demeanour vanished in a heartbeat. “Give him back to me. Now.”

Bryony cupped a hand to her left ear. “I don’t hear the magic word.”

“Please,” said Edwin.

“Never,” snarled Bryony. “Never in a trillion years. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

Bryony held out her right hand. “Unless you hand over Mum’s letter.”

“No way.”

“You know the convenient thing about mouse hostages?” pondered Bryony. “It doesn’t cost much to send their body parts through the post.”

“You wouldn’t!” squealed Edwin.

Of course Bryony wouldn’t, but she didn’t want Edwin to think that.

“Try me.”

Edwin bit his lip. Then he reached into his trouser pocket and produced a crumpled envelope.

“Here it is,” he said. “But first, I want you to hand over Stub...”

Bryony snatched the envelope from Edwin’s hand before he could finish his demand.

“Hey!” Edwin tried to grab the letter, but Bryony pushed him aside and turned her back to him. Then she pulled the letter from the envelope, almost tearing it in half with desperation.

It was her mother’s writing. There was no doubt about that.

Bryony held her breath, heart pounding in her ears as she read:

Bill,

I know you’ve been busy lately sorting out your move. But I was wondering if you have told her yet?

Please let me know as soon as possible (note my new address above).

Diana.

The words didn’t make sense; but the content of the letter itself was not the important thing to Bryony. Because there, at the top of the paper, in crystal clear block capitals, was her mother’s address.

Bryony read the address to herself, over and over again, committing it to memory as though the paper would dissolve in her hands any second.

“This is wonderful,” she gasped, finally tearing her eyes from the letter. “I’m going to find her. At last, I’m going to find Mum!”

“Where’s Stubby?” said Edwin, unmoved by Bryony’s joy. “What have you done with him?”

Bryony laughed. “I haven’t done anything with him, slime-brain. I didn’t kidnap your mangy mouse friend. Reckon he just got fed up with you and left.”

Edwin’s jaw dropped. “You lied. You vile, double-dealing...”

Still laughing to herself, Bryony stashed the letter into her trouser pocket, unzipped her suitcase, and fished out her small hand mirror and brush.

“Now push off,” she ordered, running the brush through her long black hair. “I have to look my best for Mum.”

Edwin didn’t push off, but stood by the door and scowled at Bryony. “Bit soon to be getting ready,” he grumbled. “You won’t get a flight today.”

“I’m not taking a plane,” explained Bryony. “I’ve got Mum’s address now, so Inglenook can send me there by magic.”

Edwin shook his head. “You think Wychetts’ magic is the answer to everything.”

“It is as far I’m concerned.”

Bryony finished brushing her hair, and gazed into the mirror. In truth, she’d always wanted to be blonde like Mum, but Dad wouldn’t let her go anywhere near hair dye. Perhaps that was something else Inglenook could fix for her? She was about to try wishing when she heard a loud sniffing noise.

She glanced up and saw that Edwin had his head bowed.

“Don’t know why you’re so down in the dumps,” she observed. “You could use Wychetts’ magic to find Stubby. Maybe get your Mum and Dad back together, too.”

“I can’t,” whispered Edwin, angling his face to the floor. “I can’t get dad back.”

“Why not? Don’t you like your dad because he walked out on you?”

“He didn’t walk out on us.” Edwin looked up, and Bryony saw his eyes were watering. “Something happened.”

“What?” Bryony wondered if Edwin might reveal the truth at last.

But Edwin lowered his head again. A tear trickled down his nose and splashed on the floor.

Bryony sighed and turned her attention back to the mirror. Her eyebrows could do with a bit of work, too.

“You’re weird,” she continued, considering whether she should get Inglenook to make her nostrils a bit smaller into the bargain. “Weird and sippy.”

“I’m not sippy.”

“I’d call being scared of the dark sippy. And getting all sentimental about this house.”

Bryony finished her preening, and slipped her brush and mirror back into her suitcase. “Now give me some room. I’m going to start wishing.”

Edwin stood back. “I was right about you. Mum said you were OK, but I knew what a selfish, low down little brat you are.”

Bryony made a wish, and laughed as she watched a large custard pie materialise from nowhere and slam into Edwin’s face.

“There. That’ll teach you.”

Edwin wiped the creamy goo from his eyes, and glared back at her. “Two can play at that game.”

Bryony saw the bowl of trifle flying towards her, but didn’t have time to react.

“You worm,” she gasped, head and shoulders smothered in a sticky combination of custard and jelly. “You’ve ruined my hair!”

Edwin laughed now, but the sound became a garbled scream as he was doused in gallons of cold semolina. “Why you...”

Six bucketfuls of stodgy rice pudding splattered Bryony in response.

“That’s it,” she growled. “Now you’re for it, ginger. I’m gonna wish you out of my life for good!”

Bryony screwed her eyes shut and wished, harder than she had ever wished before. It was a brilliantly inventive wish, involving a mechanical digger, a large hole in the ground, and twenty tons of quick drying cement.

But when she opened her eyes again, nothing had happened.

Edwin closed his eyes and pointed at her. Bryony braced herself...

But again, nothing happened.

“What’s wrong?” said Bryony. “Why aren’t our wishes coming true?”

Edwin opened his eyes. “There’s only guy who can answer that.”

Where Has All the Magic Gone?

“Inglenook!” cried Bryony, bursting into the lounge. “What’s happened? Why won’t our wishes come true?”

“Yeah,” said Edwin, joining her in front of the fireplace. “Where has all the magic gone?”

Inglenook’s eyes flickered open. “The magic has gone nowhere, young Master. Nor will it ever. It will always be here, as long as this building remains.”

Edwin’s ginger eyebrows puckered. “So how come we can’t use it all of a sudden?”

“Because,” replied the smiling face, “you are not allowed to.”

Bryony wrinkled her nose. “But you said the magic was mine to command.”

“Ours,” Edwin corrected her.

“Indeed it is,” agreed Inglenook. “But you have used your quota for the day.”

“Quota?” Bryony shook her head. “What quota?”

“As I mentioned before, when the Wise Ones built Wychetts, they put certain safeguards in place to stop future Guardians abusing its powers. Just as you are not allowed to

use magic for personal wealth, you are also limited to a daily quota.”

“That’s daft,” snorted Bryony, flicking a lump of stodgy rice pudding from her hair. “You can’t ration magic.”

Edwin nodded in agreement, splattering the hearth with custard. “You could have told us about the quota before.”

“I did not see the need,” said Inglenook. “I thought you must have known, being descendants of Wise Ones. You may not use any more magic for the remainder of the day. After midnight, however, I will be free once more to grant any wish you desire, as long as it is not for personal wealth or gain.”

“Midnight?” Bryony turned her angry glare from Inglenook to Edwin. “This is all your fault. You made me use more magic than I meant to.”

“How can you say it’s my fault?” Edwin wasn’t prepared to take the blame for this. “I wasn’t the one who started chucking custard pies about.”

“But you made me do it. If it wasn’t for you...”

“Come now,” said Inglenook. “There is no magic spell that cannot wait another day.”

“But this one can’t,” whined Bryony. “You’re going to be demolished in...” She looked at her watch and gasped. “Fifteen minutes!”

There was a loud rapping noise from the hallway.

“They’re here,” said Bryony, trying desperately not to cry.

Bill and Jane were still arguing upstairs, and neither seemed to have heard the knock.

“We’d best sort it out,” said Edwin, traipsing out of the lounge.

Bryony followed, expecting to see a team of workmen in yellow hard-hats outside. But instead it was a beautiful blonde haired woman with green eyes and a gorgeous diamond necklace who stood at the cottage entrance, gloved knuckles resting against the arched doorframe.

“Hello Bryony,” purred Miss Pouncefoot. “And young Edwin.” She frowned as she looked at the children. “Why are you two covered in custard?”

“We had dinner a little early,” lied Bryony. “If we knew you were visiting we would have set an extra place on the kitchen floor.”

“Where’s the demolition team?” asked Edwin, peering past Miss Pouncefoot. “Has Mr Dawes decided to save Wychetts after all?”

“I’m afraid not.” Miss Pouncefoot stepped past the children and into the hallway. “That’s why I’ve come. To take one last look at the house before it’s gone forever.”

Bryony pulled a face. “Why bother? It’s only an old shack.”

“That’s not what I think,” purred Miss Pouncefoot, walking elegantly down the hallway. “I love old houses. They’re part of our heritage. They should be preserved and respected.”

“Bit late for Wychetts,” muttered Edwin, still dripping lumpy custard as he followed Miss Pouncefoot into the lounge. “Unless you’d like to buy it off us?”

Bryony walked in behind Edwin, and laughed at her stepbrother’s question. “Don’t be dumb. Only a fool would buy a dump like this.”

Edwin nodded. “Like your dad?”

Miss Pouncefoot nodded. “That might not be such a strange idea. I’ve been thinking of investing in a property for some time now. An older property. One that needs some tender loving care.”

Edwin’s eyes widened. “You mean like Wychetts?”

“Exactly like Wychetts, yes.” Miss Pouncefoot tapped her delicate chin with a slender, brown-gloved finger. “But I’m not sure my savings would cover everything that needs doing. Skilled labour isn’t cheap these days, and I don’t think I could afford it.”

Edwin nodded resignedly. But another brilliant idea had formed in Bryony’s mind.

“What if we gave you the house, for free?”

Miss Pauncefoot's luscious pink lips curved into a beautiful smile. "Do you mean it?"

Edwin stared at Bryony, his jaw hanging open. "Have you lost your marbles?"

"One moment please." Bryony smiled at Miss Pauncefoot, then grabbed Edwin's arm and dragged him into the corner of the room.

"You're mad," said Edwin. "You can't give the house away."

"Not even if it means Wychetts will be saved?"

"Didn't think you were bothered."

"I've changed my mind."

"Good. Hope the new one works better."

Bryony spoke through gritted teeth. "Listen, hollow-head. If we give the house to Miss Pauncefoot, it means she'll call off the demolition. Wychetts will be saved, and we can use the magic again."

Edwin nodded. "Yeah, but we can't use the magic until after midnight."

"I've thought of that," whispered Bryony.

"But we'd have to square it with Mum and Dad..."

"Ahem!" Miss Pauncefoot's right foot tapped the floor impatiently. "The demolition team will be here any moment. Have you reached a decision?"

“We have,” announced Bryony, walking back to Miss Pouncefoot. “We’ll give you the house for free. Deal?”

Miss Pouncefoot clapped her gloved hands together, and her green eyes flashed with joy. “The deal of the century. Wychetts will be mine!”

“But not yet,” said Bryony, raising a finger. “You can’t have Wychetts until after midnight.”

Miss Pouncefoot’s eyes narrowed into emerald slits. “Why?”

“Oh, no real reason.” Bryony shrugged as though it wasn’t important. “Just some legal small print stuff.”

“After midnight, you say.” Miss Pouncefoot chewed her bottom lip. “How long after midnight?”

“Five minutes should be enough,” said Bryony.

“One minute,” argued Miss Pouncefoot.

“OK.” Bryony nodded, remembering that Inglenook said he could get her to America in that amount of time. “One minute past midnight. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Miss Pouncefoot.

“Brilliant!” Bryony cheered and clenched her fists. “I am so outta this place!”

Edwin didn’t seem quite so enraptured. “But shouldn’t we let our parents know?”

Bryony was about to tell him to grow up and stop being a wuss, when she saw something at the window: something that shouldn't have been there.

"The ugly tree," she murmured, pointing at the gnarled trunk now visible through the broken pane. "How can it be there? It was round the front of the house before."

"But trees can't move," said Edwin. "Can they?"

"They move all the time," said Miss Pouncefoot, stepping in front of the window. "Never mind the silly old tree. We have more important matters to deal with." She produced a small bottle from inside her coat. "Such as having a little drink to celebrate our transaction"

"I don't think so," said Edwin. "We're too young to drink. And Mum says it turns your brains to mush."

"In your case that wouldn't take much doing," said Bryony. "I'll have a drink, Miss Pouncefoot."

"You must call me Katya from now on." A smiling Miss Pouncefoot unscrewed the bottle and offered it to Bryony. "Here, take a sip."

Bryony took the bottle. "What is it?"

"Just a harmless, herbal concoction. Go on, take a sip."

Bryony hesitated. She didn't like anything 'herbal' (especially Jane's horrible tea).

"Just a sip." Katya looked expectantly at Bryony.

Bryony raised the bottle, and took a sniff. It smelled surprisingly sweet, like honey.

“Just a sip,” repeated Katya. “That’s all I ask.”

Bryony obliged, and smiled as she felt the syrupy, warming liquid slip down her throat.

“Now the boy.” Katya nodded at Edwin. “He must drink also.”

“It’s lovely,” said Bryony, licking her lips as she passed the bottle to Edwin. “Go on, try some.”

Edwin looked doubtful. “Mum says...”

“What does your mum know about anything?” said Bryony.

“She’s a teacher,” replied Edwin.

Bryony smirked. “Exactly.”

“I’m waiting.” Katya tapped her foot again. “The demolition team will be here in minutes, and our deal won’t be formalised until you have both taken a drink.”

Edwin glanced at Bryony, wiped the top of the bottle with his sleeve, and then took a sip.

“Excellent.” A purring Katya took the bottle back from him. “Now the transaction has been sealed.”

Craaaaa-aaaacck!

A ragged black bird with a bald head landed in the branches of the ugly tree, and stared through the window with

its tiny grey eyes. For some reason it made Bryony think of the man from the Council.

“I suppose we’d better tell Mr Dawes,” she suggested. “Before it’s too late?”

Katya smiled again, but it was a cold, callous expression. “I’m afraid it is already too late; for Wychetts and the pair of you.”

Bryony tried to ask Katya what she meant, but found she couldn’t speak.

Craaaaa-aaaaccck!

The black bird flapped its wings and hopped excitedly on the branch. The face in the trunk of the ugly tree seemed to come alive, leering at her...

“Bryony,” gasped Edwin. “I feel odd.”

“You are odd,” said Bryony.

“No, I mean... really odd.”

If truth be told, Bryony was feeling odd, too. Her head was swimming, and stars flashed before her eyes. Even worse, her skin seemed to be crawling, the flesh tightening painfully around her bones.

Craaaaa-aaaaccck!

Bryony heard the bird’s cackle, but she couldn’t see anything now except dabs of hazy colour.

Edwin made a choking sound. Then there was a pulsing flash, and Bryony felt her ears pop. There was a sudden rush of air around her, and she crumpled in a heap as her legs turned to jelly.

Lying on the floor, and numb with shock, Bryony forced her head up and saw she was no longer in the lounge. She wasn't even in the cottage; at least not a part of it she recognised.

The room was the size of an aircraft hangar. The ceiling was so high that she could hardly make it out, and the walls seemed miles away.

Edwin lay beside her, quivering like a leaf, his wide grey eyes focussed on something above them. Something big. Really big...

Bryony tried to stand for a better look, but a giant chocolate coloured boot stamped down close by, so hard that the ground shuddered and her legs collapsed beneath her again.

The giant boot was attached to an equally giant leg, which in turn connected with a figure as tall as a skyscraper. It was a woman, with blonde hair, and a diamond studded necklace.

A pair of huge green eyes stared down at Bryony. Katya Pouncefoot threw her head back and laughed. The noise sounded like thunder magnified a thousand times.

“What...” croaked Bryony, rubbing her eyes. “How...”

“That drink you just sampled,” explained Katya. “One of my favourite potions. Shrinks everything down to handy bite-sized portions.”

Katya raised her arms. There was a burst of bright light, and Katya’s face began to change, her beautiful features morphing into those of a cat.

“A cat,” screamed Edwin, shaking his head in terrified amazement. “You’re a cat!”

But Katya hadn’t turned into any old cat. She was a beautiful cream coloured cat with chocolate paws, green eyes, and a gorgeous diamond collar!

“You!” shrieked Bryony, shrinking away from the giant feline that stood in place of Katya. “You’re the one that attacked me!”

“It was only a scratch,” purred Katya (literally now). “If you think that hurt, wait until I’ve finished with you this time.”

“Do something,” yelled Bryony, staring pleadingly at the wooden face so high above her. “Come on, Inglenook. Help us!”

Inglenook remained silent, his carved features staring impassively into space.

“Mum,” shouted Edwin. “Help me!”

“Neither Inglenook or your parents can help you now,” snarled Katya.

The cat raised a massive paw, and Bryony flinched as the sharp dagger claws came slicing through the air towards her...

Runaway Lunch

Crraaaaa-aaawwwwwkkkkk!

Something large, black and ragged swooped down, causing Katya to halt her attack.

“You said they were mine,” croaked the balding bird. “You said I could eat them up.”

“I said no such thing,” hissed Katya, baring her needle sharp teeth. “Now get out of my way, Dawes.” She swiped at the jackdaw, which responded by pecking at her hind legs.

“Dawes?” Bryony realised why that strange bald bird had made her think of the man from the Council. It was because that strange bald bird was the man from the Council; just as Katya could turn into a cat, Mr Dawes could turn into a bird!

It took several seconds for Bryony to gather her wits. The cat and bird were still squabbling, so she seized her chance and made a run for it.

“Wait for me,” squealed Edwin, following as fast as he could.

“They’re getting away,” rasped the ugly tree. “Stop arguing, and get after them.”

Katya broke off the fight and bolted after her runaway lunch. Dawes followed, shedding tatty feathers as he took to the air.

“Faster,” urged the ugly tree.

“Like to see you move any quicker,” croaked Dawes.

“I can put a shift on when I need to,” said the tree. “Granted, I’ve not got the quickest turn of pace in the business, but for a tree I’m pretty light on my feet.”

“You don’t have any feet,” Katya pointed out.

“Oh yeah,” conceded the ugly tree. “I’ll give you that.”

Bryony ran for her life, leaving Edwin lagging some distance behind.

The lounge door was shut, but Bryony reckoned she could just about squeeze through the gap at the bottom. She was so close now. Only a couple of strides away...

There was a crack in the floor between her and the door. Not much of a crack, perhaps an inch wide at most, but an inch is quite a distance when you’ve been shrunk to the size of a matchstick. Still, Bryony reckoned she could jump it.

But Bryony was wrong.

She almost made it, but her trailing leg fell short, and she went tumbling backwards into the crevice. Somehow she managed to grab the edge of the crack, and clung on

desperately as she saw a skinny, ginger haired boy leaping through the air above her.

“Edwin,” she cried. “Help me!”

Edwin disappeared from view, and Bryony realised that he wouldn’t stop to save her. Not that she blamed him. If the boot was on the other foot...

“Give me your hand.”

Edwin appeared again at the edge of the crack, reaching down to Bryony with a bony arm.

Bryony tried, but couldn’t quite bring her free hand up to meet his flailing fingers.

A shadow fell over them, and a pair of large green eyes appeared over Edwin’s shoulder. Then the bird came swooping down, stabbing at Edwin’s head with its giant razor-sharp beak.

Edwin ducked, but lost his balance as the tip of the jackdaw’s beak grazed his shoulder. With a startled yelp he toppled forwards into the crack, hitting Bryony on the way down.

And then they were falling into darkness. Edwin screamed, and that was the last thing Bryony heard before she fainted.

In the Dark

Bryony woke; or at least she thought she did. It was difficult to tell because she was surrounded by darkness. A thick, impenetrable darkness that seemed to choke her...

Then she realised she was being choked. Someone had an arm around her neck, and was squeezing tighter and tighter.

“Get off,” she gasped, dispatching an elbow into her attacker’s midriff.

There was a high-pitched squeal, and the arm withdrew. Then the sobbing started. It was a familiar sobbing she’d heard the night before.

“Edwin?” It was so dark that she couldn’t see her stepbrother, even though he must only have been a few inches from her. “Is that you?”

“We’re gonna die,” came the mewled response. “We’re gonna be stuck down here forever and die a slow, painful death.”

“Yours will be a quick one if you don’t shut up,” growled Bryony. “So what happened?”

There was more snivelling before Edwin replied. “Don’t you remember? We got shrunk by Katya, and fell down a

crack in the floor. You must have fainted. I thought you were dead at first.”

“No such luck,” muttered Bryony.

Edwin’s sobbing stopped. “Don’t say that. Don’t ever say things like that.”

“You were the one who started talking about dying. Anyway, I’d rather be dead than stuck in a hole with you.”

Edwin started crying again. “What’s going to happen to us?”

“You’re going to get a clump on the nose if you don’t stop crying like a baby. I’m going to look for a way out.” Bryony clambered to her feet and felt around her. It seemed as though they were in some kind of narrow passage. She groped her way along the walls, but managed only a few steps before a pair of bony arms wrapped around her legs.

“Don’t leave me,” begged Edwin, clinging to her as though his life depended on it. “Please don’t leave me alone down here.”

“I’m going to find a way out. You’ll slow me down.”

“But I didn’t leave you. I came back to help, remember?”

As much as she’d rather not, Bryony did remember.

“Yeah, well... I’ll come back for you later.”

“What if you can’t find me? I’ll die down here.”

“Don’t be so pathetic. There’s nothing down here but the dark. And the dark can’t hurt you.”

“It hurt my dad.”

“What has your dad got to do with this?”

Edwin gurgled and sobbed for a while, before finding his voice again.

“There was a power cut. A fuse blew, or something. Dad went down to the cellar to check it out, but tripped on the stairs. And that’s how it happened. That’s how Dad left us. He didn’t get a divorce. He didn’t run off with someone else. He died.”

Bryony didn’t know what to say. She had never for one moment thought...

Edwin gasped for breath, and Bryony wondered if he was having some sort of seizure.

“Calm down,” she whispered. “Take deep breaths.”

Edwin’s breathing slowed a little. Encouraged, Bryony continued to soothe him as best she could.

“I’m sorry about your dad. When did this happen?”

“Four years ago. I was six, but I remember it like it was yesterday. Mum was out at the time. I heard Dad cry out, but was too afraid to go down and look for him. So I just waited. Alone in the dark.”

“That must have been terrible.” Bryony suddenly felt very guilty. “If I’d known...”

“What difference would it make?” bawled Edwin, spraying Bryony’s face with snot and tears. “You still hate me. So go on. Leave me here to die on my own.”

Bryony wiped her face without complaining. “I won’t leave you. We’ll look for a way out together.”

She set off into the darkness again; but again only managed a couple of strides before her progress was halted, this time by a scream.

“You’re going too fast,” cried Edwin. “I can’t see you.”

Bryony turned round and reached out. After a few seconds fumbling, she found Edwin’s hand. It felt horrible to the touch: all moist and sticky. She tried not to think of how many times he had wiped his nose with it.

“OK?” she asked, trying to hide her revulsion as their fingers locked together.

Edwin snivelled what sounded like an agreement.

“Good. Let’s get going.”

Progress was slow, the narrowness of the passage and the blanketing darkness limiting their combined pace to an awkward shuffle. Bryony soon lost track of time; it was too dark to see the hands on her wristwatch, and though it felt like

they'd been walking for hours it could only have been a few minutes.

But at least Edwin had stopped crying. In fact, he'd become rather chatty.

“My mum won't believe me when I tell her about all this. Getting shrunk, chased by a cat that's also a woman, and then falling through a crack in the floor. It's incredible! But who do you think they are, Katya and Dawes? People who turn into animals, or animals that turn into people?”

“Can't say I've given it much thought,” confessed Bryony. “The point is they wanted to kill us.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“Must be something to do with Wychetts. I think they...” Bryony's voice trailed off as her probing fingers felt something ahead of her.

“What is it?” asked Edwin, uncertainty returning to his voice.

“A wall.” Bryony burst into tears. “After all this time we've come to a dead end.”

Now it was Edwin's turn to do the comforting.

“Don't give up,” he whispered, patting her shoulder. “We'll just have to turn around and head back. There must be another way...”

“I’m too tired to go back. I can’t take another step.” Bryony sank to her knees, holding her head in her hands. “I’ll never get out of here, and I’ll never get to see Mum again.”

“You must miss her a lot,” said Edwin. “But don’t worry. We’ll get out of here. I’ll think of something.”

“That’ll be the day.”

“Don’t be like that. I’m only trying to help.”

“The only way you could help is by getting run over by a steamroller.”

“I’d say the same for you,” replied Edwin. “Only it would have to be a much wider steamroller.”

“Are you saying I’m fat?” snarled Bryony.

“Not technically fat. Just very wide for your height.”

Bryony would have punched Edwin if she could actually see his face.

“I hate you,” she seethed. “I hate you more than I’ve ever hated anyone else in the whole world.”

“I hate you even more,” retorted Edwin. “You’re vain, selfish, rude and ignorant. And they’re just your good points.”

“You’re pathetic, silly and ugly. Just like your Mum.”

“At least I’ve got a mum.”

That was it. Bryony couldn’t take anymore.

She closed her eyes, threw her head back and screamed.

“I... hate... yooooooooooooo!”

The shrill noise echoed down the tunnel. Then the walls started shaking, and small chips of stone came falling down on them.

“Now you’ve done it,” groaned Edwin. “You’ve made the tunnel cave in.”

More debris rained down, and Bryony choked as the passage filled with dust. There was a mighty crashing sound, before something heavy landed right on top of her...

Back to Save the World

Bryony choked, the air squeezed from her lungs by the heavy object that pinned her to the ground. It didn't feel like a lump of stone; it was more soft than hard. And furry.

Furry? Bryony managed a scream, and the soft furry thing jumped off her stomach.

"I do apologise," trilled a familiar voice. "Are you two all right?"

"Stubby," shrieked Edwin. "You found us!"

Bryony wasn't as thrilled at the mouse's return. "You can say that again," she muttered, standing up to dust herself down. "Almost crushed me to death."

"Tunnelling is an imprecise art at the best of times," said Stubby. "And mice are not diggers by nature. We prefer to leave that sort of thing to moles and suchlike."

"Well I'm glad you're here," gushed Edwin. "I thought you'd left for good."

"I fully intended to," revealed Stubby. "I wasn't going to hang around here and get squashed by bulldozers."

"You could have let me know," bleated Edwin. "I was worried stupid about you."

“I’m touched,” said Stubby. “But I dare say that didn’t require a great amount of worry.”

“So why did you come back?” asked Bryony.

“I’ll explain later. First, we need to get out of here. It’s a long trek and we’re running out of time. I’ll lead the way.”

“Hold on,” called Bryony, as she heard Stubby scrambling into the distance. “We can’t see you.”

Stubby returned in an instant. “Sorry. I was forgetting that you humans have such undeveloped nocturnal vision. Very well, grab hold of my tail.”

Bryony jumped as something thin and scaly squirmed into her hands.

“And you Edwin,” ordered Stubby. “Got a grip? Good. Let’s get going. It’s a little steep in places, but you should be able to manage even with only two legs.”

Holding tightly to Stubby’s stumpy tail, Bryony and Edwin were hoisted up into the freshly dug passage. Stubby had said it was a ‘little steep’, but it felt to Bryony like she was climbing a mountain. Edwin found the going even more difficult, and almost fell back down on more than one occasion. In the end Bryony had to take hold of his hand again, and the two of them clung tightly to each other as Stubby dragged them to safety.

“So Stubby,” began Edwin, once the going got easier, “why did you come back to save us?”

“I didn’t come back to save you. I came back to save the world.”

“The world?” said Bryony. “What are you on about?”

“Haven’t you two cloth heads worked it out yet?” Stubby tutted like an impatient teacher. “Why do you think you were shrunk down and almost killed by Pauncefoot and Dawes? It’s because they want Wychetts.”

Bryony thought that unlikely. “They don’t seem suited to each other.”

“They don’t want a nice home to settle down in and raise a family,” sighed Stubby. “It’s Wychetts’ power they seek.”

Bryony nodded as things started to make sense. “So they want Wychett’s magic for themselves.”

“Not quite. They’re working for someone else.”

“I know,” said Edwin, before Bryony could ask. “The Shadow Clan. Katya and Dawes are working for the Shadow Clan.”

“That’s right,” confirmed Stubby. “My suspicions were aroused when I was leaving the house, and spied the two creatures in the garden. I’d seen Pauncefoot before. She was the cat who attacked me when I was outside your house, Edwin. The day you found me somewhat worse for wear.”

Edwin gasped at the news. “Why was Katya snooping around my house?”

“She was keeping an eye on you. Dawes was probably watching Bryony in the same way. The Shadow Clan knew you were Guardians in waiting, the ones who would awaken Wychetts’ power. They even set up the sale of the house to Bryony’s father. It was all planned quite meticulously. It gets low here, watch your heads.”

“I don’t get it.” Bryony stooped in response to Stubby’s warning. “Why go to all that trouble to get us here if they planned to take Wychetts from us?”

Stubby had the answer. “Remember what Inglenook said? The Shadow Clan acquired Wychetts hundreds of years ago, but couldn’t use the magic because they took the house by force. Wychetts power will only work if it is freely given. And you gave it away, didn’t you?”

“No we didn’t,” protested Bryony.

“I saw everything,” said Stubby. “I followed Pauncefoot back into the house, and watched as you two idiots struck a deal with her. You gave Wychetts away, and gave the power away with it.”

“This is your fault,” rasped Edwin, prodding Bryony in the back. “Now the world will end. And there’ll be a shortage of ice cream.”

“Hang on a moment,” countered Bryony. “You were happy to go along with the deal.”

“That’s because I wanted to save Wychetts. I wasn’t just thinking about myself.”

“The only reason you don’t think about yourself is because it would be too depressing.”

“Oh please,” groaned Stubby. “Arguing won’t help the situation. You’ve got to work together if you’re going to save Wychetts. And the world, for that matter.”

“Huh?” Edwin stopped prodding Bryony in the back. “You mean we can still stop the Shadow Clan?”

“All is not lost,” said Stubby. “The Clan are gathering here tonight. Every black witch and wizard in the land will attend. Even their leader, the infamous Dark One, will be present.”

“But what can we do against all those wizards?” whined Edwin. “We’re just tiny.”

“Being small never stopped mice from achieving great things,” said Stubby.

“Like what?” asked Bryony. “Chewing through wires and leaving little black doo-doo’s everywhere?”

“I wouldn’t list those things as mice’s greatest achievements. Although some wire chewing is considered of great artistic value. Anyway, getting back to the matter at

hand, there is a way you can defeat the Shadow Clan. By using Wychetts' power."

"But we don't have any power left," sighed Edwin. "At least, not until midnight."

"One minute past midnight," said Bryony, remembering the deal she had struck with Katya. "So all we have to do is wait until midnight, then..."

"Use the power to get rid of the Shadow Clan!" Edwin squealed with delight. "Fantastic!"

Bryony wasn't so sure. "But what happens next? We agreed to hand over Wychetts at one minute past midnight. After that, will we be able to use the magic again? Or will we have given it away forever?"

"I do not know," confessed Stubby. "But that isn't important in the grand scheme of things. The main goal is to stop the Shadow Clan getting their hands on Wychetts."

Bryony wasn't so sure about that. "But I want to use the magic to get to my mum, and I might not be able to use it again after one minute past midnight."

"You might still have time," suggested Edwin, clinging tighter to Stubby's tail as the tunnel became steeper again.

"No I won't. Inglenook said it would take him one minute to get me to America. So I have to wish for that on the stroke of midnight."

“No matter,” said Edwin. “We’re both Guardians. You can use your half of magic to fly off to your mum, I’ll use my half to defeat the Shadow Clan and save the world.”

“I’m afraid that won’t work,” said Stubby. “Remember that you made a deal with Miss Pouncefoot? The only way to stop the Shadow Clan will be to undo that deal, and that will need a vast amount of magic. You will have to combine your powers to stand any chance of victory.”

“Combine our power?” Edwin and Bryony spoke together. “How?”

“You must wish for the same thing. Both of you, at the same time.”

“Us wish the same thing?” Edwin and Bryony spoke together again. “That’s impossible.”

“But you must,” implored Stubby. “The future of the world is at stake.”

“That may be the case,” huffed Bryony. “But I’m not going to wish for the same thing he wants. Never in a million years.”

“And I won’t wish for what she wants,” added Edwin. “Never in a trillion years.”

“I could bang your heads together,” sighed Stubby, “but that would achieve nothing except a dull hollow sound. Just for once, you will have to stop your petty squabbles and think

of the bigger picture. Together you have the strength to defeat the Shadow Clan, to save Wychetts and deliver the world from chaos. If you act separately, each following your own wishes, everything is doomed.”

“He’s right,” said Edwin, after a few moments thought. “We have to work together, Bryony. If the Shadow Clan get hold of Wychetts’ power, they’ll destroy the world and everything in it.”

“So what?” said Bryony. “Mum will look after me, whatever happens. And anyway, if I don’t act now, I may never get another chance to get back with her. You’d feel the same if it was your mum.”

“My mum?” Edwin gasped. “Stubby, do you know what’s happened to my mum? Did Katya and Dawes get her?”

“And my dad,” added Bryony, who had forgotten about any possible danger to her father. “What’s happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” said Stubby. “They may have escaped, or been taken prisoner by Pauncefoot and Dawes. Or...”

“Or eaten?” asked Edwin, gulping.

Bryony’s stomach lurched. “Oh no! We’ve got to find them.”

“You must be patient,” said Stubby. “You can do nothing to save your parents until after midnight, when you will once

again have Wychetts' power at your disposal. To attempt anything before then would be suicide."

"How long have we got?" asked Bryony, still unable to make out the hands on her wristwatch.

"Sssh!" ordered Edwin. "I can hear something."

Bryony listened. At first she heard nothing; then she caught a weird noise echoing down the tunnel. It sounded like a babble of excited voices, interspersed with animal-like squeaks and squeals.

"We're nearing the surface," said Stubby. "We must take care now."

Bryony saw dim light filtering down the tunnel. The weird noise grew louder, becoming a deafening din as they reached the top of the tunnel and emerged into the lounge through a hole in the skirting board.

At first Bryony couldn't see anything, and just stood there blinking whilst her eyes adjusted to the light. And when her vision finally cleared, what she saw made her want to run straight back down the tunnel.

The lounge was full of people. Well, not all of them were people. Many were animals, and a few looked like they were a bit of both.

"What are they?" she asked, gaping in astonishment and horror.

“The Shadow Clan,” whispered Stubby. “Every dark witch, wizard and warlock in the world has answered the summons to be here tonight.”

“But why?” hissed Edwin. “What have they come here for?”

Stubby turned and stared at the children with his black button eyes. “To celebrate the end of the world. Our world, that is. And the beginning of theirs.”

The Shadow Clan

Bryony gazed at the night sky through a shattered window, and thought it looked darker than she had ever seen it before; no stars were visible, but now and then the swirling clouds parted to reveal a glimpse of the full moon, which seemed trapped behind a smothering shroud of blackness.

Inside the cottage, the lounge was barely recognisable. Chains formed of bones and skulls hung from the ceiling, whilst the walls were festooned with strands of thick cobwebs sprinkled with a grisly assortment of dead insects and other unfortunate creatures.

Light was provided by a collection of oddly shaped black candles, which cast eerie twisting shadows over the wooden face that stared blankly from the fireplace.

Bryony studied Inglenook closely, but there was no sign of life in those carved wooden features. Shuddering, she tore her gaze from the fireplace to study the strange variety of beings that had assembled in the lounge.

There were creatures with fur, creatures with scales, creatures that had fur and scales; some had three eyes, some

had one, some had no eyes at all. Some hissed, some growled, and some seemed to communicate solely by breaking wind.

But these strange beings all had one thing in common; they looked, sounded (and in many cases smelt) pure evil.

They were the Shadow Clan.

“They look horrible,” whispered Edwin as he regarded the assembled fiends.

“That is true,” agreed Stubby. “But tonight is a special occasion. You should see them when they don’t make an effort.”

The Shadow Clan had made themselves feel at home in Wychetts. The kitchen cupboards had been ransacked, and Bryony saw a group of ferret faced animals tucking into a box of Jane’s horrible muesli; the fact they were eating the box, and not the muesli, came as no great surprise to her.

The family’s belongings had also been plundered. Bryony was outraged when she spotted a badger with a Mohican haircut wearing one of her favourite T shirts. The grown-up’s clothes hadn’t escaped either; several creatures sported woolly cardigans (mostly back to front or upside down), and a hairy ape-like monster used a lumberjack shirt to wipe his nose on. But Bryony noted (again with no great surprise) that not even the Shadow Clan wanted anything to do with her father’s socks.

The lounge floor was strewn with discarded clothes and possessions. Bryony, Edwin and Stubby had picked their way carefully through the debris until they'd found a suitable hiding place behind a pile of Jane's knitting materials at the end of the room next to the fireplace. They had been there for over an hour, and had watched, with a mixture of fascination and horror, as the members of the Shadow Clan assembled before them.

"Who's that?" asked Bryony, pointing to a plump, curly haired man in a glittery suit who walked into the middle of the lounge.

"Must be the warm up act," said Stubby.

"Good evening." The curly haired man addressed the watching crowd. "I say I say I say! Why are young witches good at English lessons? Because they have a natural talent for spelling! Hah!"

No one laughed, but that didn't stop the curly haired man having another go.

"I say I say I say! What sort of ghost haunts a hen-house? A poultry-geist! Hah! A poultry-geist, geddit?"

Again no-one laughed. Edwin shook his head. "Not doing a very good job of warming them up, is he?"

No sooner had he spoken than one of the crowd (a green, lizard-like monster) opened its mouth and breathed fire at the

curly haired man, igniting his glittery suit. The curly haired man screamed and ran round the room, whilst the crowd shrieked and hooted with laughter.

“He is now,” said Bryony.

Edwin continued to stare at the menagerie of monsters that filed into the lounge. “There are too many of them. Are you sure we’ll be able to beat them, even with Wychetts power?”

“For one of you it would be difficult.” Stubby lowered his voice as a creature with the head of a goat and legs of a toad hopped past their hiding place. “But as I’ve already said, you will have to combine your power to defeat them.”

Edwin looked at Bryony, but her attention was focussed on her wristwatch. It was ten to midnight. Just ten minutes to wait, then she would be back with Mum.

“Bryony!” Edwin grabbed her shoulders. “Are you listening? We have to wish for the same thing. We have to act together to save Wychetts.”

“Sssh,” hissed Stubby, as the crowd fell silent. “I think something is about to happen.”

There was a further moment’s pause, and then the silence was punctured by a harsh clacking noise. Crouching low behind a convenient ball of wool, Bryony spotted the Mohican badger in her T shirt knocking two long bones together.

Then the Shadow Clan started chanting:

“We are the blackest of the black,
We are as mean as hell.
We are the wicked and the damned,
As evil as we smell.

We are the ghosts that haunt your dreams,
Within the darkest night,
The mention of our name will put
The bravest man to flight.

We are the ugly and the cursed,
Revolting for to see.
We are so flipping nasty
No-one asks us round for tea.
We are the cruellest of the cruel,
Pure evil is our plan.
We are the wretched and the vile,
We are the Shadow Clan!”

There were cheers, hoots and honks. Then silence descended again.

Bryony held her breath and waited. A stark chill pierced the air, causing the hairs on the back of her neck to bristle. The

candle flames guttered, and from somewhere came a soft hissing sound.

A black mist rose from the floor, seeping sinisterly through the cracked stones to form the shape of a figure; a tall figure wearing voluminous black robes and a pointed hood obscuring its face from view.

The room remained silent, as every member of the Shadow Clan bowed before the hooded spectre.

“Greetings Brethren,” said the figure in a deep, whispery voice. “I am your Lord and Master. I am called the Dark One, but am also known as the Lord of the Night, Prince of Death, Baleful Baron of Blackness, and Hated Harbinger of Hellfire to All Humanity. But you can call me Colin.”

“Colin?” Edwin gawped. “My mum dated a bloke called Colin.”

“Is it him?” wondered Bryony.

“Not sure.” Edwin squinted at the hooded figure. “I can’t see his face.”

“That is because the Dark One has no face,” said Stubby.

“Then it can’t be him,” Edwin decided. “Mum’s Colin definitely had a face. Two, actually. At least that’s what Mum said after he dumped her.”

The Shadow Clan stood up, whilst the Dark One walked (or rather floated, because Bryony couldn’t see if he actually

had any feet) to the centre of the room, where he turned and addressed his disciples.

“We, the Shadow Clan, have striven for centuries in pursuit of world domination. We have plotted and schemed, using all our iniquitous ingenuity to conjure a succession of global disasters: the Ice Age, Noah’s Flood, The Black Death, and our latest and most terrible affliction, Daytime TV. But all those will seem as nothing compared to the horrifying ordeal we will inflict upon the world tonight!”

The Shadow Clan cheered, screamed and hooted in triumph.

“Daytime TV?” Bryony shook her head. “The Shadow Clan were behind Daytime TV?”

“Who else could have thought of it?” asked Stubby.

The cheering stopped as the Dark One raised his arms, and stretched his skeletal fingers towards the shattered lounge ceiling.

“For tonight, after half a millennia of waiting, we shall seize the power of the Wise Ones and unleash it upon the world. Starting at one minute past midnight, there will be floods and famine, earthquakes and tidal waves. Fire will rain from the sky, and continents will collide in a catastrophic cataclysm. All who defy us shall perish, and the remainder

will become our slaves. And there will be a world-wide shortage of ice cream.”

More honks and cheers greeted the Dark One’s words.

“Yes!” The Dark One stabbed the air with a pointed talon. “Even mint choc chip!”

The cheers reached a deafening crescendo.

The Dark One waited for the noise to fade before continuing his speech. “But before we claim our ultimate triumph, we must give thanks to those who worked so hard for this victory. Ladies and gentlemen, lords and lizards, I give you Miss Katya Pouncefoot and Mr Jack Dawes!”

Bryony nudged Edwin, directing his attention to two familiar figures (now back in human form), who walked through the crowd to bow before their leader. Dawes still wore his tatty suit, but Katya had changed into an elegant cream coloured ball gown with brown satin gloves. The Shadow Clan cheered again. Katya and Dawes basked in their adulation.

“You have done well,” said the Dark One. “And will be rewarded for your actions. Miss Pouncefoot, you will be promoted to Vicious Vice President. Mr Dawes, you will be Executive Executioner of Evildoing. You will both get an extra day annual leave, and a ten percent increase in expenses allowance, subject to the submission of valid receipts.”

“And what about me?” rasped a voice from the window. Bryony peered through the glassless frame and saw the ugly tree outside.

“Of course,” said the Dark One. “We must not also forget the efforts of our loyal servant Twisted Bough.”

“Who’s Twisted Bough?” asked Edwin.

“Only the most evil tree in the world,” revealed Stubby.

Bryony frowned. “But what can trees actually do that’s evil?”

Stubby shrugged. “Drop acorns on your head, leak sap all over your car, that sort of thing.”

“That’s not particularly evil,” pondered Edwin.

“It’s all relative,” said Stubby.

The Shadow Clan gave Twisted Bough a polite ripple of applause, mixed with the odd grunt.

“Let us continue,” said the Dark One. “Now...”

“Hold up,” said Twisted Bough. “Don’t I get a reward for my services?”

“You got a ripple of applause and an odd grunt,” said Dawes. “What else do you want?”

“Promotion would be nice,” suggested Twisted Bough. “I could perform some function in head office.”

“Only if you were made into a desk,” laughed Dawes. “Which I wouldn’t advise, given how much woodworm you have.”

“I’ve contributed as much as you in all this,” insisted the ugly tree. “I’ve been keeping a watch on the cottage for the last five hundred years. Like to see either of you sit here for that long.”

“Oh come off it,” said Dawes. “It’s not like you had to cancel a back-packing holiday in the Himalayas, is it? You’re a tree. That’s all trees do. Stand around.”

“Perhaps I’m not the quickest,” accepted Twisted Bough, “but without my support this operation would never have succeeded.”

Dawes croaked disdainfully. “The only thing you can support is fungus.”

“Of course you will be rewarded,” said the Dark One. “Twisted Bough, I hereby proclaim you Head Tree of the Fetid Forest of the Damned.”

“Oh,” said Twisted Bough.

“What do you mean ‘oh’?” asked the Dark One.

“Well,” said Twisted Bough. “I was hoping for something a little closer to home. You see I’m not too keen on commuting.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” muttered Dawes.

“Enough of this,” hissed the Dark One, waving a clawed hand impatiently. “We have more important matters to attend to.”

“But before we begin,” purred Katya, “I would like to make a special presentation to you, oh great and merciless Dark One.”

“Please call me Colin,” said the Dark One.

Katya smiled, and drew her left arm from behind her back. A collective gasp went up from the crowd, and the Dark One leaned forwards to inspect the two tiny human figures in Katya’s gloved hand.

“I don’t believe it,” whined Edwin. “It’s Mum!”

“And Dad,” gasped Bryony. “They’ve shrunk our mum and dad!”

“Be quiet,” snapped Stubby. “They’ll hear.”

But no one was listening; all eyes in the room were focussed on Bill and Jane as they squirmed in Katya’s grip.

“What are these creatures?” asked the Dark One, curiously.

“The Guardians of Wychetts,” said Dawes. “For you to do with as you will, Colin.”

“Let us go,” shouted Bill. “You have no right to enter our home and treat us like this.”

“This is your fault,” Jane screamed at Bill. “If you hadn’t bought this stupid house in the first place...”

“Oh belt up,” snorted Bill. “I’m fed up with you going on and on and on...”

“I can’t believe they’re still arguing,” sighed Bryony. “At a time like this!”

The Dark One hissed with delight. “You have excelled yourselves, my Brethren. I will leach the life from these Guardians and feast on their power.”

“We’ve got to do something,” urged Edwin.

“But we can’t,” said Bryony. “Not without Wychetts’ magic.”

Another chorus of cheers and squeals sounded as the Dark One’s clawed fingers reached out towards Bill and Jane.

“I have a plan,” revealed Stubby. “And a very clever plan, if I may say so. Perhaps the cleverest plan devised by a mouse since one of my distant ancestors thought ‘I wonder what that stuff called cheese tastes like’.”

“Well?” asked Bryony, expectantly.

“It’s simple,” began Stubby. “All we need to do is...”

But before Stubby could explain his masterstroke, a desperate Edwin had taken matters into his own hands. He ran from their hiding place, waving his scrawny arms and

screaming at the top of his voice. “Hey! Over here! It’s me you want. I’m a real Guardian!”

“What’s he doing?” gasped Bryony.

“The fool,” muttered Stubby. “He’ll ruin everything. Wait there while I bring him back.”

Bryony watched as Stubby galloped towards Edwin. But it was already too late.

All heads in the room had turned to look at the tiny ginger haired boy, and a stunned silence fell.

“You don’t want to eat them,” yelled Edwin, pointing at Bill and Jane. “I’m the one with the power. Eat me instead.”

“What is this?” hissed the Dark One, his hooded head twitching back to Bill and Jane. “I thought these were the Guardians.”

Katya’s green eyes widened as they spied the minute figure of Edwin.

“That was only a joke,” she said, tossing Bill and Jane away. “We knew the real Guardians would turn up. It was all part of our plan.”

Bryony opened her mouth to scream as Bill and Jane fell from Katya’s hand, but her horror turned to relief as they landed on a tangled heap of orange wool lying close by her.

Bill and Jane bounced safely on the wool, while Bryony left her hiding place and ran towards her father.

“Oh Dad,” she sobbed, throwing her arms around Bill as he got shakily to his feet. Bill staggered back, as shocked by his daughter’s reaction as he was by the fall. Bryony was still hugging him when she heard Jane’s scream.

“Edwin! Nooooooooooo!”

Bryony looked up to see the forlorn figure of Edwin cowering beneath a giant chocolate coloured boot.

“I’ll crush you,” purred Katya. “Crush you like the insect you are.”

Jane screamed another warning, but Edwin stood frozen in terror as Katya’s boot came stamping down...

Ginger Marmalade

“How dare you compare this boy to an insect,” squealed Stubby as he charged towards Edwin. “That’s insulting to insects.”

The mouse slammed into Edwin from behind, just as Katya’s boot came stomping down. Sent flying by the impact, Edwin rolled to safety. But Stubby was not so lucky, and his stumpy tail was pinned to the floor by Katya’s toe.

“You again!” Katya reached down and picked Stubby up by his right hind leg. “You got away from me before, but now there will be no escape.”

Bryony watched, horrified, as Katya tilted her head back and dangled Stubby above her gaping mouth.

“Listen children,” squealed the upside down Stubby. “Only you can save Wychetts and the world. And you can only do that together. You must wish for the same thing.”

And that was the last thing Stubby said before Katya swallowed him in a single gulp.

A loud cheer erupted from the Shadow Clan. Bryony put a hand to her mouth. Jane gasped with shock. Edwin screamed, but fell silent when Katya switched her attention back to him.

“And now to finish you off,” she sneered, raising her boot again. “I’m going to grind you into ginger marmalade.”

Jane rushed forwards, but Bill held her back. “Leave this to me!”

Jane struggled in her husband’s grip. “Leave this to you? After the muck up you’ve made of everything? Never! Now let me go!” From somewhere she found the strength to shove Bill away.

Bill fell against a ball of wool, and the impact sent it rolling across the floor.

Relishing her moment of triumph, Katya held her foot in the air above the cowering Edwin. But then her attention was drawn to something else. Her face lit up, and her emerald eyes flashed with joy as she spied the tumbling ball of wool. In a flash she transformed into a cat and leaped after the ball, purring dementedly as she chased it out through the open lounge door and into the hallway.

“Now’s our chance,” said Bryony. “Let’s get Edwin and make a run for it.”

But before Bryony, Bill and Jane could reach the prostrate Edwin, something black and ragged came swooping down at them.

“I shall deal with them,” croaked Dawes, now transformed into a bird.

A massive pointed beak snapped at Bill, who fell backwards and slammed his head against the floor. The jackdaw let out a raucous cry of triumph, and was about to lunge for the kill when Jane came running at it, wielding a giant knitting needle.

“Get back,” she screeched, thrusting aggressively. “Keep your nasty big beak away from my husband.”

Surprised at her stepmother’s bravery, Bryony watched in amazement as Jane thrust the needle at the bird’s neck. Dawes squawked and jumped backwards, landing on the pile of tangled orange wool that Bryony now realised was that hideous cardigan Jane had knitted for her.

“Take that,” snarled Jane, jabbing the needle mercilessly at her downed opponent. “And that! And that! And...”

Dawes grabbed the needle in his beak. Jane wouldn’t let go, and was hoisted off the ground as the jackdaw took to the air.

Bryony just stood there, powerless to help as Jane was lifted higher. Then she saw that the jackdaw’s left leg was snagged in the cardigan. Dawes flapped furiously in an attempt to free himself from the woollen snare, shedding a flurry of ragged feathers in the process.

The cardigan tore, and Dawes broke free with a defiant squawk. But a strand of wool was snagged round his clawed

foot, and the cardigan unravelled as the jackdaw flew upwards.

Acting instinctively, Bryony rushed to the cardigan and seized the trailing strand of wool. Dawes squawked angrily as Bryony tugged him backwards. He beat his wings faster, and the wool slipped through Bryony's hands, burning her palms. Wincing, she managed to wrap the thread round her waist and tie a hurried knot, planting her feet apart and leaning back to counter the strain.

At first she thought that had done the trick: Dawes seemed to tire, but just when Bryony felt she was winning, he flapped harder and shot up again, taking her with him.

"Bryony! Jane!" Bill sat up groggily, too dazed to do anything but stare as the giant bird carried off his wife and daughter.

The sound of Bill's cries faded as Bryony was hoisted higher. Dawes circled the room, croaking triumphantly. Below them the members of the Shadow Clan cheered and hooted with delight. Jane was still clinging to the knitting needle held in the jackdaw's beak; her eyes were clamped shut and she had turned a weird shade of green. It looked like she was about to pass out. Bryony knew she had to do something, before it was too late.

But what could she do, dangling on a length of woollen thread?

“Order!” hissed the Dark One, waving his skeletal hands about. “This is an official Shadow Clan function, not a children’s party! Please can we have some order!”

But everyone was having too much fun to pay attention to their leader. Dawes swooped low, and a selection of hands, claws and pincers reached up to grab Bryony. All missed their target, but Bryony’s relief vanished when she saw the green lizard monster straight ahead of her.

A dart of bright flame shot from the lizard’s mouth. It was aimed at Bryony, but somehow she escaped unscathed. But again her relief was short-lived; looking upwards she noticed the woollen thread was severely singed, and the blackened fibres were disintegrating.

But that wasn’t the only thing on fire. Dawes’ tail feathers hadn’t escaped from the flames, either. The jackdaw squawked and croaked with pain, trailing black smoke like a damaged aircraft as he spiralled through the lounge door.

Though her head was spinning, Bryony recognised the hallway as they zoomed along the dark narrow passage. Then she glimpsed the kitchen, and another open door beyond...

The sound of screaming made Bryony look up again. Jane was losing her grip on the needle, and was now clinging on

with only one hand. Before Bryony could shout “Hold on!” a sudden swerve from Dawes made Jane lose her grip completely.

Bryony grabbed Jane’s arm as she tumbled past, and the frayed woollen strand snapped under the strain of their combined weight.

At first Bryony didn’t know what had happened. She watched the smoking jackdaw disappear through a broken window, and wondered why the air seemed to be rushing around her. It was only when she looked down that she realised they were falling...

Your Terror Has Made Me Stronger

Edwin sat up, and tried to work out how he wasn't squashed flat.

The room rang with cheers and squeaks, but a familiar voice cut through the din.

"Bryony! Jane!"

It was Bill, shouting and gesturing wildly at something high above him.

Edwin followed his stepfather's gaze, and saw Dawes zooming through the opened door, leaving a trail of black feathers and smoke in his wake.

"Mum?" Edwin got awkwardly to his feet and staggered towards Bill. "Where's Mum gone? What's happened to her?"

"She is finished," growled a voice. "As you soon will be."

A shadow fell across the floor, and Edwin looked up to see every face in the room leering down at him.

"What do we have here?" asked a creature that looked a cross between a monkey and a bat. "Surely this feeble little worm isn't a Guardian?"

"No wonder it was so easy to take the power from them," cackled a green-faced crone with a wart the size of a golf ball

on her nose. Or was it, Edwin wondered, a golf ball sized nose on her wart?

“Indeed,” sneered a three horned goat in an ill fitting woolly cardigan. “He’s just a pathetic little boy.”

“That’s right,” hissed a voice from behind him. “A pathetic little boy who’s scared of the dark.”

Edwin wheeled round to see a black hooded figure hovering over him. The Dark One himself!

“I’m not scared,” Edwin bleated unconvincingly.

“Oh yes you are,” said the Dark One. “You have been ever since the night I took your father from you.”

“You?” Edwin gasped.

“I take many lives that way,” hissed the Dark One. “And feed off the fear left in my wake. And you, little boy, have sustained me greatly these past few years. Your terror has made me stronger than ever.”

The Dark One hovered closer, so close that Edwin could see right inside the hood. There was no face visible within the folds of cloak, nothing but darkness. And that was far scarier than any of the ugly faces in the room.

“And now I claim you,” said the Dark One. “Now you will be consumed by the night.”

“Leave him alone!” Bill shielded Edwin from the towering hooded wraith. “He’s just a kid. Pick on someone your own size!”

The Dark One hissed angrily. “Your bravery is matched only by your stupidity, little man. How dare you resist the Dark One.”

Bill shook a fist at the Dark One. “Go to hell!”

“What a good idea,” said the Dark One. “I could do with a nice relaxing holiday when all this is over. Now will someone please dispose of this interfering pest?”

The green-faced crone with the golf ball wart on her nose (or was it vice versa, Edwin still wasn’t sure) picked Bill up.

“You’re a pretty little thing,” she crooned, holding Bill close to her face. “I shall take you home, and dress you in fine clothes, and make for you a little house in which you shall live with all my other pretty dollies.”

“That’s very kind of you,” said Bill. “But I don’t think my wife would be too keen on such an arrangement.”

“As you wish,” cackled the crone. “Instead I shall boil you alive in melted cheese, and feed you to my slugs.”

Bill nodded. “I think she’d be OK with that.”

“You may do with him as you please,” said the Dark One. “After I have feasted on the boy.”

The Dark One leaned closer, and the darkness seemed to leak out from his hood, curling round Edwin and dragging him in.

Edwin tried to scream, but somehow the darkness seeped into his mouth and stopped the sound. He could hardly breathe, and felt like he was suffocating...

Hanging Around With Jane

Bryony didn't open her eyes until she was absolutely certain she was dead; and to her surprise found that she wasn't.

"Bryony?"

Jane's voice was shrill with anguish. Bryony looked round and saw her stepmother hanging upside down beside her.

No. Jane wasn't upside down. But Bryony was; dangling upside down in a mesh of sticky ropes.

"What happened? Where are we?"

"I've no idea," confessed Jane. "Last thing I remember I was being picked up by that horrible bird. What was it? And those awful creatures back there?"

Bryony knew all this was going to take some explaining, but did the best she could. "They're evil wizards and witches, and they've come here to claim Wychetts' power and cause global famine and destruction."

"What?"

"And a worldwide shortage of ice cream."

Jane stared blankly at Bryony for several seconds. Then burst into tears.

“I know.” Bryony nodded sympathetically. “Even mint-choc-chip.”

Jane sobbed harder.

“But don’t worry,” said Bryony, trying to placate her stepmother. “I think we’ve managed to escape from them.”

“But what about Edwin? He’s still in there. My poor little boy. My poor, darling little boy...”

“And my dad,” Bryony reminded her. “Don’t forget him.”

“Oh don’t worry,” hissed Jane. “I won’t forget your father. How could I, after all the misery he’s caused me and my poor little boy?”

“It’s not his fault. Well, not all of it.”

“So whose fault is it?”

Bryony took a deep breath. This was going to hurt.

“Mine,” she admitted with a grimace. “I made all those things go wrong when Mr Dawes came to visit. I wanted to get rid of the house so I wouldn’t have to stay in this stinky hovel with you and Edwin, so I could go to America and live with my mum. My real mum.”

“Do you think that would be for the best?” Jane raised a ginger eyebrow. “Your mother might be too busy to look after you right now.”

“Of course she’s busy.” Bryony wasn’t sure what Jane was driving at. “She’s got a special high flying job. But she’d

find time for me. I'm her daughter, her only child, the most important thing in her entire world."

"Perhaps you're not any more," said Jane. "Perhaps now she might have someone else who's more important."

"No way!" Bryony laughed at such an idea. "She might have boyfriends and that, but I'm the only special person there is. And I always will be."

"I don't mean a boyfriend." Jane bit her lip, as though she'd said something she shouldn't have.

"So what do you mean?" asked Bryony.

Jane looked away. "I think you should ask your father, darling."

"I'm not your darling," spat Bryony. "And if anything's happened with Mum, how come Dad hasn't told me?"

"He knows how important your mother is to you." Jane looked at Bryony again. "He doesn't want to break your heart."

Bryony felt her cheeks burning. It might be because she was hanging upside down and all the blood was rushing to her head; or it might be because deep down inside she realised Jane might be right.

Why would Mum suddenly stop writing? Why had Dad refused to talk about her? Something had changed; Bryony had sensed it for a while now.

And then there was Mum's letter to Dad, and those words that didn't make sense:

I was wondering if you have told her yet?

From above them came a soft scrambling sound.

"What's that?" Jane's ginger head jerked upwards.

"It's Dad," said Bryony, more from hope than expectation. "I'll ask him about Mum. He'll tell me if anything's happened to her." Then she shouted as hard as she could. "Dad! Dad, I'm down here!"

There was no response to her calls. Bryony twisted her neck and peered up into the gloom. She thought she saw a dark shape moving, but it didn't look like her father: too squat, too bulbous, and with far too many legs...

"I don't think that's Dad," she whispered, looking nervously at Jane.

Jane gulped. "Then what is it?"

Bryony peered up again, but the dark shape had vanished. "Perhaps it wasn't anything. Just a trick of the light."

Then Bryony looked Jane again, and saw something monstrous hanging in the air next to her stepmother's head.

It was like the giant creature she had summoned from the toilet, only bigger. And uglier. Much, much uglier...

And then, despite all her best efforts at maintaining self-control, Bryony just couldn't help herself.

“Spider!” she cried. “Giant spi-der!”

Jane looked round, and started screaming. The spider just hung there, leering greedily at them with eight beady eyes. Bryony now knew what the sticky, ropey thing was that had broken their fall.

It was a web. And they were trapped like flies. Flies to be eaten!

The spider reached out a thick, hairy leg. Jane screamed again, even louder than before. Bryony joined in, but both were helpless, their arms and legs fused to the sticky strands of web.

The spider came closer to Bryony, so close that she could see the hungry expression on its mean little face. She’d never realised that spiders could actually look hungry; but then she’d never been this close to one before. She saw its drooling mandibles twitch, and felt her skin prickle where the tip of its leg brushed against her arm.

Bryony wailed. “He’s going to eat me!”

“Oh no he won’t.” Snapping out of her petrified stupor, Jane managed to free one arm from the sticky web.

“Leave my stepdaughter alone,” she yelled, slapping the spider’s abdomen with the back of her hand. “Leave her alone, do you hear me?”

Jane's efforts had little effect, so she slipped off a sandal and used that to help get her message through. "I said leave her alone! LEAVE... HER... ALONE!"

The last slap seemed to do the trick. As if deciding these two particular flies were too much trouble, the spider made a scuttled retreat back up the web.

"You beat it," said Bryony, smiling at Jane. Then she felt a strange vibration coursing through the web, and looked up to see that the spider was chewing through the strands attached to its victims.

There was a twang as the first web strand broke. And then another. And another...

And suddenly Bryony and Jane were falling again.

I'm Not Scared of the Dark

Edwin choked, and felt the breath sucked from his lips by the cloying darkness that enveloped him.

“Edwin!” Bill’s voice faded into the distance. Then Edwin heard another voice...

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, son. It’s only a power cut. I’ll nip downstairs and see what’s happened.”

Then there was a scream; a horrible scream that would stay with Edwin forever.

“You are alone,” hissed the Dark One. “Alone in the blackness, alone in the terrifying emptiness that is my domain. Your fear is mine to feed on. All mine...”

Edwin could hardly breathe now. It felt like a pair of icy hands was squeezing his throat. He was alone, just like before.

“Alone,” whispered the Dark One. “Alone in the darkness forever.”

“Edwin...” Bill’s voice sounded again, louder this time. “Don’t let him beat you. He’s only the dark. And the dark is nothing to be afraid of. It’s nothing.”

But Edwin knew that wasn’t true. There were things in the dark: evil, snake-like things with horrible scaly bodies that

coiled and twisted around him. There were dark figures, grotesque faces, clawed hands that reached out to touch him.

“It’s nothing, Edwin! Nothing but shadow!” Again Bill’s voice sounded. Edwin tried to focus on the words, trying to ignore the hideous forms that filled the blackness around him.

Nothing but shadow. Edwin repeated the words to himself.

“You’re nothing but shadow. Nothing but shadow.”

“You’re not afraid of shadows,” shouted Bill. “Your father wasn’t. That’s why he went down into the cellar that night. He wasn’t afraid of shadows, and neither are you.”

Edwin knew that Bill was right. Dad, his real Dad, hadn’t been scared of the dark. Edwin had to be strong like him. He had to face his fears.

Only, he couldn’t.

“But I’m a wuss,” he whimpered. “I’m not brave like Dad.”

“You are brave,” insisted Bill. “You were brave just now when you tried to save your mother and me. You risked your life for us, Edwin.”

Yeah, Edwin told himself. Perhaps I’m not a wuss after all. Perhaps I can be brave like Dad.

“I’m not afraid of shadows,” said Edwin. “I’m not afraid of the dark.”

He repeated the words, and his voice grew stronger.

“I am not afraid of the dark. I am not afraid of shadows.”

And as his voice grew stronger, Edwin felt his fear subsiding.

Slowly, the twisting forms and threatening faces receded. The air around Edwin became lighter, warmer.

“I am not afraid of shadows. Not afraid of the dark.”

As he spoke, Edwin felt the air rushing back into his lungs.

“I am not afraid of the dark.”

“What?” asked the Dark One, his voice shrill with shock.

Edwin threw his head back and shouted. “I AM NOT AFRAID OF THE DARK! AND I’M NOT AFRAID OF YOU!”

A terrifying wailing noise rent the air. Suddenly the darkness retreated, and Edwin saw the members of the Shadow Clan holding their heads in their hands as they watched their leader dissolving.

Yes, dissolving. The Dark One imploded, his robes folding in on themselves as though sucked through a hole in the air. Then, incredibly, the Dark One’s disciples did likewise, shrieking and screaming as they followed their leader into oblivion.

The wart faced crone melted, exhaling a nerve-shredding scream as her body, warts and all, bubbled into nothingness.

In a heartbeat, the room was empty.

Except for Bill, who sat on the floor looking just as bewildered as Edwin.

“What happened?” asked Edwin. “Where did they go?”

“You beat them.” Bill got to his feet and clapped Edwin hard on the shoulder. “You beat the darkness.”

Edwin grinned, discreetly rubbing his shoulder as he basked in Bill’s praise. “I did. I beat the Dark One and the Shadow Clan.”

Bill gave him a hug, which hurt Edwin’s shoulder even more. “You saved the day.”

“You helped me,” admitted Edwin. “I never would have done it without you.”

A shrill scream rang out from somewhere distant.

“Bryony!” Bill started running towards the door.

“Mum!” Edwin followed Bill from the lounge.

“The kitchen!” Bill quickened his pace across the hallway floor as more screams sounded.

Edwin’s lungs almost burst as he struggled to keep up with Bill. It would normally have taken a few seconds, but in their shrunken state traversing the hallway was more like a cross-country jog.

Eventually they reached the kitchen, but there was no sign of Jane or Bryony.

Another scream, louder and more desperate now.

“They’re in the bathroom,” realised Edwin, pointing to the opened door at the end of the room.

Bill set off in a sprint again. Spurred by the sound of his mother’s terrified cries, Edwin followed close on his stepfather’s heels.

It seemed an age before they reached the bathroom. Charred black feathers lay scattered on the floor, but there was no sign of Dawes. Nor Bryony or Jane, but Edwin could hear their screams coming from the direction of the toilet.

And then they appeared, clinging to each other as they fell from behind the cistern and into the toilet bowl.

“Mum! Bryony!” Edwin’s cry was a hoarse croak. He turned imploringly to Bill. “We’ve got to get up there.”

Bill pointed to a long handled brush lying on the floor. “If I can prop this against the toilet, we’ll be able to climb up to them.”

Bill dragged the brush towards the toilet, but couldn’t quite manage to lift it up to the edge of the bowl.

“I’ll help,” offered Edwin, rushing to Bill’s aid.

Bill looked unsure, but then nodded. “Good lad. Now get a firm grip there. Ready?”

Amazed that Bill had actually let him help, Edwin grasped the giant handle and waited for the command.

“After three,” instructed Bill. “One. Two. Three. Lift!”

It was a bit of a struggle, but they managed to tip the brush so that the handle rested against the side of the toilet.

Edwin waited until Bill had clambered up the brush handle before following, his heart racing at what he might find when he got there.

Had Mum and Bryony survived the fall? Had they drowned in the filthy toilet water?

When he reached the rim of the toilet, Edwin was relieved to see that Jane and Bryony were fine, albeit in a rather uncomfortable situation.

Jane clung with one hand to the rim of the bowl; her other hand was clutching Bryony, who dangled beneath her.

“Quickly,” called Jane. “I can’t hold on for much longer. She’s too heavy for me.”

“Are you saying I’m fat?” snarled Bryony.

Bill hurried round the toilet rim and knelt, reaching down for Jane’s arm.

“Edwin,” he shouted, “I’ll need your help here.”

Edwin scuttled to Bill’s side, and grabbed hold of Jane’s arm. He caught sight of her wristwatch and noted the time.

Eleven fifty seven. Just three minutes left before they could use the magic again.

But now they didn't have to defeat the Shadow Clan. Now they were free to use Wychetts' power for whatever they wanted.

Only Edwin wasn't sure what he wanted anymore. It would have seemed unthinkable this morning, but now he was actually having doubts about returning to his previous life with Mum on their own. The day's bizarre events had affected him, altered his view of life. Altered his view of Bill and Bryony.

Bill had helped him defeat the Dark One. And Bryony...

Bryony. Edwin gazed down at her and smiled. For some strange reason he felt glad to see her again. And even stranger still, she looked glad to see him.

If only for a second.

"Hurry up," she grumbled. "My arm's about to pop out of its socket."

"After three again," Bill told Edwin. "One. Two. Three. Lift!"

But struggle and strain as they might, Bill and Edwin couldn't lift Jane and Bryony to safety.

"Get Bryony first," gasped Jane. "Then you can lift me."

"But we can't reach her," groaned Bill.

"I can," ventured Edwin. "If you keep hold of me."

“I won’t let go,” promised Bill, in response to a fearful wail from Jane. “Let’s do it, Edwin.”

Holding Edwin’s left arm, Bill lowered his stepson over the edge of the toilet.

Bryony reached up, but her grasping fingers fell agonisingly short of Edwin’s outstretched hand.

“Just a bit more,” urged Edwin.

Bill lowered Edwin as far as he dared, but it still wasn’t quite enough.

“It’s no use,” said Bill. “I’m going to lose my balance if you go any further. Edwin, I’m going to have to lift you back up.”

“No.” Edwin was convinced he could reach Bryony. “I’m going to give it another try.”

Straining every muscle, Edwin lunged at Bryony’s hand.

Their fingertips brushed, and for a moment Edwin thought he’d done it.

But the moment ended when Bill lost his balance, and went sprawling over the edge of the toilet.

A Little Flushed

Everything happened in slow motion.

Bryony saw her father tumbling through the air, taking Edwin with him.

She saw them rolling down the side of the toilet. She saw Edwin's mouth open in a silent scream as hit the murky water.

There was a splash. Then Bill and Edwin disappeared beneath the surface.

"Edwin!" howled Jane. "Oh my poor boy! He can't swim!"

"Neither can Dad," cried Bryony. "Oh Dad! Daaaaaad!"

Bryony and Jane stared at the slimy pool below them. The surface was still, no sign of movement.

Then Bryony saw bubbles, and seconds later something emerged from the slimy depths.

It was Bill, coughing and spluttering as he dragged Edwin up with him.

"Oh thank God," gasped Jane. "Edwin, are you all right?"

Edwin managed a smile at his mother. "It was my bath night anyhow."

Bryony laughed, but then noticed how her father was struggling to keep both him and Edwin above water. She looked up and saw Jane was also in difficulty.

“I’m not sure I can hold on much longer,” whimpered Jane. “I’m sorry, Bryony.”

“Not long now.” Bryony glanced at her wristwatch. It was eleven fifty eight precisely. “Just two more minutes.”

Two minutes for Jane to hold on. Two minutes for her father to keep himself and Edwin afloat. Two minutes before Bryony could make her wishes come true again.

Then her troubles would be over. She would be in America with Mum. Dad would be there, too. Her life would be like it was before. There would be no more Jane. No more Edwin. No more Wychetts.

With her free hand, Bryony reached into her trouser pocket and pulled out her mother’s letter. She read the address to herself, again and again, until the words were burned into her mind.

A groan from above made Bryony look up. Jane’s face was bright crimson and contorted with agony, but still she clung to the rim of the toilet. Bryony was surprised at how strong and resilient Jane had turned out to be. Perhaps she wasn’t such a wuss after all.

Switching her attention back to her father, Bryony saw he was floundering a little, but managing to remain afloat.

“Just ninety seconds to go,” she called out, showing her wristwatch to Edwin. “Are you OK?”

Edwin spat out a mouthful of rancid water, then smiled and gave a thumbs-up gesture.

Bryony smiled back, and admitted to herself that maybe, like his mum, Edwin wasn't so bad. Perhaps in the future, if she ever visited England again, she might pay him a visit. It wouldn't be a regular thing. Just a one off. And probably for only half an hour. But it would be nice if they both kept in touch.

Suddenly she noticed that Edwin's expression had changed. He wasn't smiling anymore; he was pulling a horrible face, like he used to do when he was trying to tease her.

Bryony wasn't putting up with that. She pulled a face back at him, making a mental note that perhaps she wouldn't bother keeping in touch after all. Edwin seemed intent on prolonging the game, his expression becoming even more grotesque. And then he screamed.

Bryony was about to scream back when a shadow fell over her. She looked up and witnessed the cause of Edwin's strange behaviour.

“What have we here?” said the human-shaped Katya, looming menacingly over the toilet. “Some horrible little insects that refuse to go away. And what do we do with horrible little insects? We flush them down the toilet.”

Katya smiled, and reached up to grab the chain.

“Wait,” croaked Bryony.

Much to Bryony’s surprise, Katya obliged.

“What is it?” she asked, her hand freezing on the chain. “Want one last request before I send you back to where you belong?”

Bryony glanced at her watch again. Just one minute to go. All she had to do was keep Katya talking.

“Well?” demanded Katya, her slender, satin clad fingers caressing the rusty chain. “I don’t have all day. I’m moving house, if you remember, and there’s lots of unpacking and furniture to arrange.”

“You can’t win,” blurted Edwin, before Bryony could think of anything to say. “The Dark One is beaten, and the rest of the Shadow Clan with him. Your plans are finished.”

Katya tilted her head back and laughed. “On the contrary, everything has gone exactly to plan. My plan, that is. I always intended to get rid of the Dark One, and then claim Wychetts’ power for myself. If anything, you’ve helped me get what I wanted.”

“Then save us,” said Bryony. “Why do you need us dead?”

“You are Guardians,” hissed Katya. “And while you live there is always the chance you will try to thwart my plans. Take a deep breath and savour it; it will be your last.”

Her gloved hand tightened on the chain.

“Wouldn’t you prefer to eat us?” asked Bryony.

“No thanks.” Katya wrinkled her delicate little nose. “I don’t like the idea of eating something that’s been down the loo. Besides, I’m not so hungry right now. I’ve just had supper.”

Bryony winced as she remembered Stubby’s sacrifice. She couldn’t let it be for nothing. Another peek at the watch. Forty seconds...

“But enough chat,” purred Katya. “I’ve waited long enough for this moment. Goodbye, my pathetic little playthings.”

“Hold on!” It was Edwin who cried out this time. “I’ve got a question. Are you a cat that turns into a woman, or a woman that turns into a cat?”

Katya smiled mysteriously. “Both.”

Then she yanked hard on the chain.

Bryony braced herself. There was a loud gurgling, but that was all.

Katya scowled. “The flush isn’t working.”

“Don’t worry,” called out Bill. “I’ll sort it first thing tomorrow.”

Bryony glanced down at her father, but couldn’t tell whether he was joking or not.

But Katya wasn’t done yet. She pulled the chain again.

More gurgling ensued, louder this time. High above her, Bryony saw the wooden cistern trembling. A head of water was building up. One more yank would probably be enough.

Twenty seconds to go. The gurgling got louder still.

“Edwin,” called Bryony. “Get ready to use the magic.”

“We have to wish for the same thing,” cried Edwin. “That’s the only way we can undo the deal we made with Katya.”

Bryony shook her head. “I’m going back to Mum.”

“But we have to save Wychetts. We can’t let Katya use the power for evil.”

“I don’t care,” shouted Bryony. “I’ll be with my mum. My real mum. She’ll protect me no matter what. I’m her only child, her special girl.”

Bill looked as though he was trying to speak, but dirty water splashed into his mouth, and all Bryony heard was an agitated gurgling.

“All right,” croaked Edwin. “Go back to your precious mum. But I’m going to save Wychetts.”

“You can’t,” warned Bryony. “Stubby said we can only defeat the Shadow Clan if we combine our powers. You’ll fail if you try to save Wychetts on your own.”

Edwin nodded. “I’m willing to take that chance.”

“But if it doesn’t work...” Bryony stared aghast at her stepbrother. “You’ll get flushed down the loo. You’ll drown. Both of you.” She looked up at Jane, whose face now resembled a wrinkled beetroot.

“Edwin will do what’s right,” Jane hissed through clenched teeth. “Just like his father would have.”

“But you’ll drown!” screamed Bryony, staring down at Edwin once again.

“What do you care?” spat Edwin. “What do you care about anyone but yourself?”

With a shriek of desperation, Katya grabbed the chain with both hands and pulled so hard that it snapped. The cistern almost came away from the wall. The gurgling reached a deafening crescendo.

Bryony looked at her watch again, then closed her eyes and counted.

Five, four, three, two...

The sound of rushing water thundered in her ears, and then a violent force hurled Bryony into the toilet. Jane's hand slipped from her grasp, and she hit the water so hard it knocked the breath from her lungs.

In a heartbeat she was under, sucked into the swirling torrent. Her eardrums felt fit to burst from the terrible roar, and when she opened her eyes she saw nothing but darkness.

Then she heard Edwin's voice. It was distant and distorted. But she recognised the gurgled words.

“Make a wish, Bryony.”

But Bryony could hardly breathe. Foul tasting water seeped into her nose and throat, causing her to choke. For a moment she saw light again, and a pair of emerald eyes glaring at her from above.

Then she heard Edwin's voice again. “Bryony, it's time to make a wish!”

Time to make a wish...

This was the moment; the moment Bryony had been waiting three years, six months and thirteen days for. Now she could have what she had yearned for. Now she could be with Mum again, have the life she missed so much.

So why did she hesitate?

She heard Edwin's voice once more, but now it was a gargled scream.

A swirling current snatched the letter from her hand, and Bryony saw the paper float away into the gloom.

But she remembered her mother's address, and recounted the words in her mind as she was sucked down. Down and down until there was no light. Until there was nothing, not even the darkness.

What Bryony Wished For

Suddenly there was light.

Bryony shut her eyes, dazzled by the glare.

She stood there for several seconds, savouring the gentle warm breeze on her face and the sweet tasting air that filled her lungs.

Then she opened her eyes again.

She was back to normal size, and standing in an impressive street in front of an even more impressive house. It was the complete opposite of Wychetts: a clean, modern, stylish building with an immaculate front garden.

She didn't have to look at the nearby road sign to work out where she was.

Mum's house in America!

But how?

Bryony shook her head, trying to work out what could have happened. But what did it matter? She was in America, right in front of her mum's house, just where she wanted to be.

What was she waiting for?

Bryony set off towards the impressive house, but froze at the sound of a voice from behind her.

“Wait, darling.”

Bryony turned to see her father standing there.

“Oh Dad, you made it too!” She grabbed Bill’s hand and squeezed hard. “Come on. Let’s see her.”

Bill didn’t move. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “You can’t.”

Scowling, Bryony let go of her father’s hand. “But she’s my mum. I can see her whenever I want.”

“Not yet. Not until I’ve told you.”

“Told me what?”

“I’m sorry.” Bill lowered his gaze to the immaculate pavement. “I don’t know how to say...”

“I don’t have time for this,” snapped Bryony. “Are you coming with me or not?”

Bill’s head remained bowed, his response a soft whimper.

Bryony gave up on her father, and rushed up the spotless drive towards the beautiful front door of the impressive house. She was about to ring the bell, but then took a moment to compose herself. She had just fallen into a dirty toilet. She must look a right state. She couldn’t meet her mother looking like this.

She caught her reflection in a window, and realised her fears were unfounded. She was wearing nice clean clothes (a gorgeous outfit she’d seen in a catalogue and had been

nagging Dad to buy her for ages) and her hair had been cut and styled. And dyed blonde, too. She looked perfect.

A smiling Bryony made a few minor adjustments to her fringe before pressing the door bell.

Bryony's smile became a grin as she listened to the expensive sounding chimes. Seconds later the door was opened by a tall man in a grey suit, who Bryony assumed was her mother's butler.

"Do you want something?" asked the butler, in a snooty voice.

"It's me," said Bryony, spreading her arms.

The man frowned at her. "And who might you be?"

Bryony was about to tell the butler who she was, then decided it would be better if she surprised Mum; the look on her face would be something to savour.

"My name is not important," said Bryony, trying hard to hide her smile. "I've come to see the lady of the house. I have some very important news concerning the whereabouts of her daughter."

"Daughter?" The butler looked puzzled. "But the child is here."

"Huh?" Bryony's dark eyebrows knotted together. "What do you mean..."

From behind the butler came the sound of little footsteps accompanied by a shrill, child-like squeal. Bryony peered into the hallway and saw a tiny figure tottering towards her.

She was probably eighteen months old, if that. Her hair was a shimmering blonde, and she was the living image of Bryony's mother.

The infant gazed back at Bryony, as though she shared the older girl's curiosity. Then Bryony heard her mother's voice.

"Where are you, darling?"

"I'm here," said Bryony instinctively.

"Ah there you are. " Mum came into the hallway and scooped the toddler into her arms. "I've been looking all over. We don't want you running out into the road, do we my precious pumpkin?"

Precious pumpkin? That's what Mum used to call Bryony.

Bryony's mother kissed the girl on the forehead, then looked at Bryony.

Time stood still. Bryony tried to smile, but for some reason every muscle in her face had turned to stone. Her heart stopped beating, and the air froze in her lungs.

"And who is this?" asked Mum, still staring at Bryony as she addressed the butler. There was no hint of recognition in her eyes, not even a glimmer.

“I’m not altogether sure,” said the butler, shuffling uncomfortably. “This young lady says she has news of your daughter.”

Bryony’s mother looked down at the infant in her arms. “What news? What does she mean? I have my daughter here.”

Bryony’s lips parted slowly.

My daughter. The girl that looked so much like Mum...

The realisation came, stabbing Bryony’s heart like an icy spear.

Mum had a daughter. Another daughter. Bryony was no longer her special one.

“Well?” Mum’s voice became irritable as she stared at Bryony. “Are you going to explain what this is about?”

But Bryony couldn’t speak. Her mouth had drained of moisture, and her tongue turned to jelly.

“I’m waiting,” sighed Mum. “Either you explain your presence here or leave my property immediately. I am a very busy person.”

Bryony just stood there.

Then Mum frowned. “Hold on. I’ve seen you somewhere before. Oh God. It can’t be...”

Bryony’s mother put a hand to her mouth.

“Is it you? Bryony?”

It took an agonising amount of effort, but Bryony managed to speak.

“No,” she whispered, forcing a smile despite the excruciating pain that wracked her insides. “I’m not Bryony.”

“Then who are you?” asked Mum.

“I’m no-one,” said Bryony.

And then, with tears burning her eyes, Bryony turned and ran. She ran down the spotless drive, out into the immaculate street, and into her father’s arms.

Bryony's New Home

“Are you OK, sweetheart?”

Bryony saw her father staring at her, his eyes wide with concern.

“You gave me a fright just then.” Bill stroked Bryony’s forehead. “Must have dozed off, eh?”

“I didn’t doze off.” Bryony stared at her father. “I saw her, Dad. I saw Mum.”

“But Mum’s in America, sweetheart.”

“Yeah, but so are we.”

Bill smiled and shook his head. “You were dreaming.”

Bryony rubbed her eyes and looked around her. She was sitting in a car. Her dad’s car. And the view through the windows didn’t look like an immaculate American street.

Brown fields. Drab grey sky. England.

“But I saw her,” insisted Bryony. “I went to Mum’s house and...”

Bill’s smile fell. “And?”

Bryony swallowed, and took a deep breath before saying the words. “I saw the girl.”

Bill drew back, his lips parting in surprise. “You know?”

Bryony started crying, and lowered her head. She saw a plastic bag sticking out from under her leg, and realised she was sitting on some sandwiches.

“I’m sorry.” Bill stroked Bryony’s long black hair. “I’m so sorry, love.”

Bryony lifted her tear-streaked face and gazed at her father. He was crying, too.

“She doesn’t love me anymore,” sniffed Bryony. “She doesn’t love me and she never wants to see me again.”

“That isn’t true. Of course she loves you, she always will. And she does want to see you again.”

Bryony stared into Bill’s eyes, and this time she knew he wasn’t lying.

“But when?” she asked, her voice a yearning croak.

“Soon. She’s been busy with work and bringing up the baby. Besides, she was waiting for me to tell you.”

“Couldn’t she tell me herself?”

“She wanted to, but she wasn’t sure how to break it. So I promised her I’d tell you instead.”

“So that’s why you kept her address from me?”

Bill nodded. “Didn’t want you writing to her and finding out before I told you.”

Bryony rolled her dark eyes. “So why didn’t you tell me?”

Bill chewed his bottom lip. “I kept meaning to. But every time I built up to it, something happened and I never got the chance. Besides, I was afraid. Afraid of breaking your heart.”

“Oh Dad...”

“I’m sorry,” sighed Bill. “Guess I botched it up again.”

Bryony shook her head and smiled. “You didn’t botch up, Dad. You weren’t the one who walked out on us for a cleaner.”

Bill grinned. “He was a Hygienic Cleansing Executive, remember? But you mustn’t blame your mother. We were both at fault.”

“I don’t blame anyone, Dad. All I wanted was for things to be like they were.”

Bill’s grin flickered. “But they never can be.”

“I know now.” Bryony nodded slowly. “But do you think she’ll always love me? Do you think I’ll always be special to her?”

“Of course,” said Bill. “Just as you’re special to me.”

They hugged each other, long and hard. Bryony’s pain had faded, and in a way she felt as if a terrible burden had been lifted from them both.

“Come on,” said Bill, taking her arm and helping her from the car.

“Are you OK?” Jane took hold of Bryony’s other arm as she stood up. “We were worried about you. Weren’t we, Edwin?”

Bryony caught sight of the boy standing next to Jane. Edwin stared impassively at her, his freckly face devoid of emotion.

“I’m sorry,” she said, wiping a tear from her cheek. “I sat on your sandwiches.”

Edwin made no reaction. Bryony closed her eyes.

What had happened? Where was she?

“Are you sure you’re OK?” asked Jane, laying a hand on Bryony’s shoulder.

“I’m fine,” snapped Bryony, opening her eyes again. Then she smiled at Jane. “I’m sorry. I meant to say I’m fine, thanks.”

“Come on,” said Bill, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s go and see the place.”

Place?

Still in a state of bewilderment, Bryony allowed Bill to lead her up the narrow lane until they reached a garden gate. It was painted white, and had a word on it.

“Wychetts.” It was Jane who spoke, smiling as she read the word. “What a quaint name.”

Bryony glanced at Edwin, but before she could speak Bill had opened the gate and dragged her into the garden.

Suddenly the grey clouds parted. Dazzled by the glaring sunlight, Bryony closed her eyes. And moments later, when she opened them, she exhaled a gasp of astonishment.

The sight was glorious to behold. There was an immaculately tended lawn, and neatly arranged borders festooned with an array of gorgeous coloured flowers.

But that was nothing compared to the house.

The cottage was beautiful, like something out of a picture book. The steep thatched roof was in perfect condition, and the windows all had glass in them. The walls gleamed with fresh white paint, contrasting beautifully with the dark brown timbers. The chimney was still crooked, but didn't look like it would collapse any second.

"It can't be," gasped Edwin, shaking his head.

"It is," said Bryony, after a long period of silence. "It's Wychetts."

"But not as we left it," mused Edwin.

"Oh it's gorgeous," sighed Jane, her eyes moist with joy.

Bill opened the front door and beckoned everyone inside. "Wait till you see the interior."

Jane hurried in. Bryony and Edwin swapped another puzzled look, before haring as fast as they could towards the

cottage. They arrived together, and got jammed in the arched doorway. But this time they just laughed and wriggled about until somehow they both fitted through.

If the exterior of Wychetts had changed for the better, the interior had undergone an even more astonishing transformation. No smell of mushrooms, no flaking plaster, and the whole place seemed much lighter somehow. And there was even furniture.

“This is the study,” said Bill, showing them into the first room.

Jane nodded approvingly. “Very nice. But wouldn’t it make a better dining room?”

Bryony and Edwin burst out laughing, and then raced into the lounge.

The room was changed beyond belief. The walls were a warm shade of pink, and the stone floor polished so that it gleamed. The heavy beams that ran across the ceiling had been waxed to a nice shiny finish, but the biggest transformation was at the far end of the room.

A fire glowed welcomingly in the hearth, but it was the carved wooden face above that drew the focus of the children’s attention. Inglenook beamed back at them, as waxed and shiny as the rest of the woodwork. He looked almost brand new.

“What happened?” asked Bryony, hurrying to the fireplace.

“Your wishes came true,” said Inglenook, as though it was obvious.

Edwin reached Bryony’s side. “But I didn’t think we could save Wychetts unless we combined our magic.” His eyes narrowed as he looked at Bryony. “Unless we wished for the same thing.”

“Who said we didn’t?” Bryony shifted awkwardly under Edwin’s searching gaze.

Edwin gasped. “But I thought you wanted to be with your mum?”

“I did,” admitted Bryony. “But...” Suddenly she felt tears welling up again. “But I couldn’t let you get flushed down that dirty old loo, could I?”

“So you chose to save Wychetts, after all!” Edwin’s look of bewilderment morphed into a delighted smile. “Perhaps you’re not as selfish and low down as I thought.”

Bryony smiled back, and hurriedly wiped a tear from her cheek. “I was only worried you’d pollute the local sewage works.”

Edwin laughed, and Bryony saw his eyes were moistening too.

“But I don’t get it,” she sniffed, turning her gaze back to Inglenook. “I wished to save Wychetts, so how come I ended up at my mum’s house in America?”

“You have Edwin to thank for that,” said Inglenook. “You both wished for Wychetts to be saved, but Edwin also wanted you to know the truth about your mother. For Edwin already understood.”

“Understood what?” said Bryony.

“That there are some things,” said Inglenook, “that magic, even Wychetts’ magic, cannot make better. Some things are best left to time and the heart to mend.”

Some things are best left to time and the heart.

Inglenook’s words repeated in Bryony’s mind. She turned to look at Edwin again. Years ago he’d lost his father, yet he had never been tempted to use Wychetts’ magic to bring him back. That had puzzled her, but now Bryony thought she knew why.

Of course, she still ached for her mother, yet she knew there was no going back. Her life had changed, but not necessarily for the worse. She had a new home now. And Edwin, for that matter. She’d never wanted a brother, but they had been through a lot together in the past twenty-four hours, and Bryony was finding it difficult to remember how life had been without him.

Then there was Jane. Still a bit too smiley for Bryony's liking, and her taste in clothes would take a lot of getting used to, but she had proved she was stronger than Bryony had suspected. Perhaps, in time, she could think of Jane as a Mum. A real Mum.

And of course, she would always have Dad.

"And this is the lounge," said Bill, ushering Jane through the door.

"Oh it's wonderful!" A smiling Jane clasped her hands together. "Just like I dreamed. Oh, and look at this!" She rushed the fireplace and pointed at the carved wooden face.

"That's Inglenook," said Bryony.

"He's beautiful." Jane tickled the wooden face on the nose. Bryony thought she heard a gentle purring, and the floor trembled slightly. Jane drew back, and then turned to face her husband.

"Well?" asked Bill, sounding a little nervous. "What do you think of it?"

"I think it's lovely." Jane planted a big sappy kiss on Bill's cheek. "And you are the loveliest man in the world for finding it."

"And you two?" Bill switched his attention to the children. "Do you think you'll be happy here?"

Bryony and Edwin looked at each other.

“Well?” Jane looked worried by the children’s silence.

Bryony was about to reply, and then saw something scuttling up Jane’s shoulder. It was only small, about the size of a pin-head, but Bryony knew what calamity even the tiniest spider could cause...

But before Bryony could act, Jane had spotted the offending arachnid, scooped it up in her hand and carried it to the window.

“There you go,” she crooned, opening the window to let the spider go free. “You’re much better off outside with all your brothers and sisters.” She turned back to everyone and smiled. “I used to be terrified of spiders. But for some reason they don’t bother me anymore.”

Bryony looked at Edwin, who just grinned.

“Let’s see upstairs.” Bill took Jane’s hand and led her to the door. “Come on kids, bet you can’t wait to see your rooms.”

“We’ve got separate rooms?” asked Bryony.

“With a floor?” asked Edwin.

Bill looked at the children as though they were mad. “Yes, you have separate rooms, both with a floor.”

“And what about electricity?” Bryony glanced at Edwin as she spoke.

Bill nodded. "Of course. What kind of house do you think this is? Now are you coming up with us?"

"In a moment," said Bryony, waiting till the grown ups had gone before speaking again to Edwin. "I'm sorry about mentioning electricity. I wasn't poking fun about ... you know. The dark thing."

Edwin grinned. "But I'm not scared anymore. I faced down the Dark One himself."

Bryony put a hand on Edwin's shoulder. "You were the hero of the day." Then she glanced at Inglenook. "But are the Shadow Clan really beaten?"

"Evil can never be truly vanquished," said Inglenook. "And that is just as well, for there must be a balance in all things. Good and evil. Light and darkness. In a way that is what makes life worth living. However, I think it will be some time before the Shadow Clan attempt anything on that scale again."

Bryony walked to the window, and peered through the leaded glass into the beautiful garden. She noticed a dead looking tree, but it was covered in pretty pink honeysuckle, and didn't look threatening anymore. But what was that, staring back at her from behind its great trunk?

Bryony thought she saw a pair of bright green eyes. But in a flash they were gone.

Bryony turned back to Inglenook. “But what if they try something?”

“Wychetts will face many dangers to come,” said Inglenook. “But next time, as Guardians, you will be ready for them. We all will be ready for them.”

“And that includes me,” said a shrill voice from somewhere. Edwin felt movement, and looked down to see a mouse’s head peering up from inside his jacket pocket.

“Stubby! You’re alive!”

“It would appear so,” said the mouse. “If you can class being stuck in a smelly pocket as such. Still, it’s marginally better than a cat’s stomach.”

“You saved my life,” said Edwin, remembering Stubby’s sacrifice. “How can I ever repay you?”

“Please don’t go overboard,” said Stubby. “Five pence should cover it.”

Edwin frowned. “Are you saying my life is only worth five pence?”

“Of course not,” said Stubby. “That figure includes VAT and administration charges. I’ll accept cash, but cheque payment will incur a further processing charge.”

Bryony stifled a giggle, before addressing Stubby herself. “I’m sorry, I should have listened to you from the start. You

were right about Edwin and me needing to work together to save Wychetts.”

“Of course I was right,” said Stubby. “Mice are always right.”

“If you say so.” Edwin scooped Stubby up and placed him on the floor. “Now I don’t want to keep you here against your will. You’re free to go if you want.”

“Well, er...” Stubby seemed taken aback by the offer. “I didn’t say I wanted to leave. Maybe I’ll stick around for a while. From what I’ve seen you two will need keeping an eye on.”

Bryony laughed and clapped her hands. She’d never thought she’d be relieved to see that mouse again, but so much had changed in just a few short hours...

“I’m sorry too,” said Edwin suddenly.

Bryony frowned. “What for?”

Edwin angled his gaze to the floor, and there was a long pause before he replied. “That letter from your mum. I should have given it to you before. And I knew all along about the baby. I overheard Mum and Bill talking about it one day round our place.”

Bryony shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. I know now.”

Edwin looked up again, a hopeful smile on his lips. “So you’re going to stay here, with me and Mum?”

Bryony pretended to think about it for a bit. “Oooh, well... I suppose so. We’re Guardians, aren’t we?”

“Are we?” Edwin looked suddenly worried. “But didn’t we give up the power when we gave the house to Katya?”

“That is so,” said Inglenook. “However, when you wished for Wychetts to be restored, it was necessary for me to reverse time by one day to accommodate that wish. So the moment when you gave Wychetts to Miss Pauncefoot hasn’t occurred yet. Therefore, technically, you are still Guardians.”

“We are?” asked Edwin and Bryony together.

“Indeed,” said Inglenook. “But there is still much for you to learn. You have barely begun to understand the ancient wisdom. Yours is a heavy burden; the magic must be guarded carefully, and used only for the most important reasons.”

Edwin looked downbeat. “So a cheeseburger’s out of the question?”

“Eat in or take away?” asked Inglenook.

“Eat in,” replied Edwin. “And spare the gherkins this time.”

Inglenook obliged, and Edwin hummed with delight as he bit into the delicious bun. Bryony watched him eat, and just couldn’t resist herself. Seconds later Edwin choked, and spat out a lump of burger.

“Hey,” he snarled. “It’s made of rubber. I didn’t ask for...” Then he looked at Bryony. “You!”

Bryony threw her head back and cackled. That was until a bowl appeared from nowhere and tipped cold blancmange over her head.

Now it was Edwin’s turn to laugh, but his joy lasted only a matter of seconds before a gooey custard pie slammed into his face.

Then Bryony screamed and ran from the room, pursued by Edwin and an enormous floating bowl of trifle.

Stubby sat on the floor and tutted. “Dear oh dear, Inglenook. I think you’ve got your work cut out with those two.”

Inglenook chuckled, and every stone and timber in the ancient building reverberated with the sound of deep, joyful laughter.

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