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CHAPTER 1

The quarter bell woke Emily in the night as Big Ben's chimes sang across the river to Lambeth and in through her bedroom window.

The streetlamps outside bleached the room a faint orange. On the wall above her bed three black glass hares chased one another in an endless circle, glinting in the light. Both her pillow and Feesh, her cuddly crocodile, were damp with tears. She levered herself up, then groaned at the red numbers on her alarm clock. Quarter to midnight, seven hours since being sent to bed forever, and she was starving.

She flopped back down on the pillow and nuzzled poor, soggy Feesh (who she only kept as a joke, and definitely didn't snuggle every night). How had this happened again? How? As

always, her mom was the problem. There was just something so infuriating about her that it kept turning Emily into a human firework of foot-stamping rage. Light fuse, stand well back. Whizz, bang, pop. Huge fight. Grounded. It was totally unfair. She'd been well within her rights this time, too. Billy Jenkins from school had seen her helping her mom get something out of a dumpster, and had told everybody she lived like trash. It had made her cringe so hard there was a medical possibility that she'd never uncurl, and it was *all* her mom's fault.

According to their neighbor's most recent complaint to the council, her mom was "a crazy Irish art woman who made noise at all hours." Emily didn't disagree, but would have added "deeply shameful." If her mom didn't keep dragging her out on "special missions" to get "important art materials" *from dumpsters* to make crazy sculptures, then none of this would have happened. She wouldn't have been totally shamed at school, and she wouldn't have gotten so angry that she'd run home and ended up screaming at her mom in the kitchen about everything embarrassing she'd ever done (highlights of which included peeing behind a bush at track and field day, rescuing a lobster from a fish tank at a fancy restaurant, and once getting on the bus dressed as a horse). Emily wouldn't have made her mom cry, either. The last bit had been . . . pretty horrible. In fact, she had maybe said some things she

really sort of regretted. Now she was grounded so hard by her dad she'd probably have to be homeschooled.

She would admit, if she were forced to by, like, a truth potion or something, that her big mouth hadn't helped matters. Her mom called it the "family gob," as if it was an inherited disease. If so, Emily totally had a bad case of it. When she was annoyed, or embarrassed, the gob had a mind of its own, and her mom was annoyingly embarrassing *all the time*. And that was why she hadn't said sorry, and that was why she wasn't allowed out of her room until Christmas.

Lying in the dark, the white-hot anger had faded and left behind a horrible aftertaste. Could she just lie here and not have to talk to her mom ever again? Maybe if she slipped into a coma? She was pretty hungry, though. Colossal bust-ups undoubtedly used a lot of calories. What if she raided the fridge—SNAP! The loud squeak and clatter of the big brass letter box opening and snapping shut downstairs interrupted her plans for food piracy. Who on earth was delivering things at this time of night?

There was a groaning creak from the unoiled hinges on their front gate. She sat up to peer out the window. Leaving the garden was a figure so big it was going out the gate sideways and still struggling to fit. The hulking form was holding a small black umbrella, which cast a shadow over its face. Emily pressed her nose to the window as the enormous shape

squeezed out of the gate and strode off down the street with a hip-swaying walk, fancy umbrella still held high. It wasn't even raining, either. Weirdo.

She was still staring when a familiar noise chimed up from downstairs: the light, metallic almost-ring of a bell. Someone had come out of the living room and brushed past her dad's bike in the hall. He kept his big, black, bone-shaking bike there to ride to work at the post office. It was impossible to walk past it without the old brass bell dinging. More brassy notes sounded now as somebody else came into the hallway. Oh god, what was she going to say if they came up to lecture her?

It was a good time to be asleep again. She arranged herself into a very-definitely-asleep-possibly-even-comatose position and waited. The sound of an urgent conversation drifted up from the hallway, but no one came up the stairs. She lasted a whole minute, then, as a very curious person (desperately nosy, according to her mom), she slid out of bed. She picked her way through the obstacle course of books and clothes on the floor and inched the door open. She crept out onto the landing, avoiding the creaky board, snuck her head around the top of the stairs, and peeked down.

Her mom and dad were in the hallway below at the foot of the stairs, by the front door. Her mom was sitting on the bottom step wearing her long, thick coat and pulling on the big pair of spray-painted army boots she used for dumpster

missions. Emily's dad was standing over her, frowning. He was holding a letter written on a sheet of thick, cream-colored paper. He had the envelope, too, a heavy, khaki-colored thing with two big, black, old-fashioned stamps in the corner. This must be what the umbrella giant had delivered. Double weirdo.

"But it doesn't make any sense, Maeve. Who delivered this? It's not midnight yet, so it can't be from the Night Post." He tapped the envelope with a stiff finger. "There's stamps on it but no postmark. It's very strange."

Her mom looked up and grinned. "Oh, and doesn't that make it all the more fascinating?" She still had a rich Irish accent despite living in London for Emily's whole life.

Her dad redoubled his frown. He read from the letter.

"I have been asked to write to tell you that Patrick, of your clan, finds himself in grave difficulties, and would request your immediate assistance, by the code of fealty."

Her mom made a full eaten-something-sour face.

"Grave indeed! It's worrying about him what put Great-Auntie Aoife in hers, everybody knows it." She shook her head. "I'd best go and have a look. I'm the only one who can get any sense out of the eejit, anyway."

"But why ask *you* to come in? Surely the whole point is that you stay out? The man's a . . ."

He waved his hands, lost for words.

“Family’s family, eh?” her mom said with a shrug.

Emily’s ears were on fire. This was a red-alert gossip alarm going off. Her mom never, never talked about her family. *Ever*. Emily had done SO much nosing about it, and all she’d been able to get out of her was that “they didn’t get on.” What was that supposed to mean? Her mom just wouldn’t talk about it, though. Which was unusual in itself, because she normally never shut up.

Her dad held the letter up to the light and squinted at it.

“It just doesn’t smell right. The wrong post, anonymous letter, *Pat*,” he said that last word like he was swearing, “wanting you to go there after all these years.”

He gave her mom what Emily recognized as his most serious stare. “Are you sure it’s not something to do with *her*?”

Who were they talking about? Emily was afire with curiosity (and massive nosiness).

“Ah, we saw the last of that wagon years ago,” said her mom, still bent over the complicated laces of her big boots. Not somebody they liked then. “Wagon” was one of those words her mom shouted at the neighbor she was feuding with.

“Even so, it’s highly suspicious. We should send a letter to the Night Watch and report it.”

“Oh, we definitely should. Absolutely.”

“I note you’re still tying your boots up,” said her dad, crossing his arms.



“Yup.”

“No sign of getting a stamp.”

“Nope.”

“I see. Why don’t I go instead when I’m at work tomorrow night?”

Her mom bounced to her feet and grabbed the letter. “Love, don’t do the face, please. If Pat’s in trouble, then I should be there. If it’s . . . something else, then we need to know. And . . .”

Her mom grimaced and turned to look upstairs toward the bedrooms. Emily ducked back around the corner and her whole body jangled as an electric shock of nerves jolted through her. That was too close.

“I could surely do with a run right now, eh?”

Her dad let out a long, pained sigh.

“I suppose so, but you haven’t been back since Emily was born. Don’t let earlier . . .”

Emily inched around again. Back where? Ireland?

“It’s not just that. I miss the old country sometimes, miss the job, too.” Her mom sniffed as she zipped up her coat. “I even miss the clan a bit.”

Her mom had a job? How had that worked? She didn’t normally get up until lunchtime.

Her dad didn’t say anything, but his hand squeezed her mom’s arm. She looked away.

“I’m clearly not wanted around here, anyway.”

“That’s not true, and you know it! Think how you were at that age. The stories you’ve told me!”

“Ah, I was a right mare, I suppose.” Her mom’s usually cheerful face dropped into a dark frown Emily hadn’t seen before. “I’m just not cut out for all this. I don’t fit in here and I’m doing it all wrong.”

“You’re not. There’s no right way. She’s just at a difficult age.”

Emily bit her knuckle so as not to give herself away by growling.

“Yeah, me too,” said her mom. “Right, I’m going to stretch all my legs, find out what’s going on with that eejit, and I’ll be back before ye know it.”

Her dad, tall against her mom, reached to open the door. He paused.

“Wait, what about the you-know-whats?” He gestured at her chest.

Eh? Was this a sports bra conversation?

“Ah, they’ll be fine. I’ll be in and out in three shakes of a pony’s tail. I can’t leave ’em here, can I?”

“Hrrrrmmm,” her dad grumbled.

“Shhhh.” Her mom cut him off with a finger on the lips. “I am famously uncatchable. It’ll be fine.”

“I caught you,” he muttered past her grubby finger.

“Ye did, didn’t ye? And now ye’re stuck with me. Come here,” her mom said, and leaned into her dad.

The distinct sounds of smooching followed. Emily ducked her head back around the corner. Some things could never be unseen. She gave it another thirty seconds to be on the safe side, then inched her head back.

They’d finished, thank goodness, and her mom was just ducking under her dad’s arm to go out the door.

“If I leg it now, I can make the door at the old church before the bongos.”

“Have you got your shadow key? And—”

She turned a withering glance on him, and he stopped talking, raising his hands in surrender.

“Just because I’ve retired doesn’t mean I’ve gone daft.”

She stepped into the night, then turned back.

“Keep an eye on the lesser horror, eh?”

*Hmmph.*

Her dad nodded once more and then she was gone, without a goodbye. He held the door open for a long time, just watching the dark where she had been. Emily stayed, too, until the cold air made her shiver and creep back to bed. She crawled under the covers just as Big Ben started to chime again, and the deep, resonant notes sang across the river marking the midnight hour.