

GREGOR AND
THE
PROPHECY OF BANE

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CHAPTER

1

When Gregor opened his eyes he had the distinct impression that someone was watching him. He glanced around his tiny bedroom, trying to keep as still as possible. The ceiling was empty. Nothing on his dresser. Then he saw it sitting on the windowsill, motionless except for the delicate twitching of its antennae. A cockroach.

“You’re just looking for trouble,” he said softly to the cockroach. “You want my mom to see you?”

The cockroach rubbed its feelers together but made no attempt to run away. Gregor sighed. He reached for an old mayonnaise jar that held his pencils, emptied it on the bed, and in one swift move trapped the cockroach beneath it.

He didn't even have to get up to do it. His bedroom wasn't actually a bedroom. Probably it was supposed to be some kind of storage space. Gregor's single bed was wedged into it so, at night, he came in the doorway and crawled straight up to his pillow. On the wall facing the foot of the bed, there was a little alcove with just enough room for a narrow dresser, although you could only open the drawers about eight inches. He had to do his homework sitting cross-legged on his bed with a board on his knees. And there was no door. But Gregor wasn't complaining. He had a window that looked out on the street, the ceilings were nice and high, and he had more privacy than anybody else in the apartment. No one came in his room much . . . if you didn't count the roaches.

What was it with the roaches lately, anyway? They'd always had some in the apartment, but now it seemed like every time he turned around he'd spot one. Not running. Not trying to hide. Just sitting there . . . watching him. It was weird. And it was a lot of work trying to keep them alive.

This past summer when a giant roach had sacrificed herself to save his two-year-old sister Boots's life miles beneath the city of New York, he'd vowed never

to kill another one of the bugs. But if his mom saw them, man, they were goners. It was up to Gregor to get them out of the apartment before her roach radar kicked in. When it was warm out, he'd just trapped them and put them out on the fire escape. But he was afraid the bugs would freeze now that it was December, so lately he'd been trying to stick them as far down in the kitchen trash as he could manage. He thought they'd be happy there.

Gregor nudged the roach off the sill and up the side of the mayonnaise jar. He crept down the hallway past the bathroom, past the bedroom that Boots, his seven-year-old-sister, Lizzie, and his grandma shared, and into the living room. His mom was gone already. She must've taken the breakfast shift at the coffee shop where she waited tables on weekends. She worked full-time as a dentist's receptionist during the week, but lately they needed every penny.

Gregor's dad lay on the pull-out couch. Even when he was asleep he wasn't still. His fingers twitched and plucked fitfully at his blanket, and he was muttering softly. His dad. His poor dad . . .

After being held prisoner by huge, vicious rats far beneath New York City for over two and a half years,

his dad was a wreck. During his stay in the Underland, which was what the inhabitants called it, he'd been starved, deprived of light, and physically abused in ways he would never discuss. He was tormented by nightmares and at times he had trouble separating reality from illusion even when he was awake. This was worse when he was feverish, which was often, because despite repeated trips to the doctor, he could not shake off a strange illness he'd brought back from the Underland.

Before Gregor had fallen after Boots through a grate in the laundry room and helped rescue his dad, he'd always thought that everything would be simple once his family was reunited. It was a thousand times better having his dad back, Gregor knew that. But it was not simple.

Gregor moved quietly into the kitchen and slid the roach into the trash. He set the jar on the counter and noticed it was bare. The fridge held half a carton of milk, a gallon bottle of apple juice with maybe one glassful in it, and a jar of mustard. Gregor braced himself and opened the cabinet. Half a loaf of bread, some peanut butter, and a box of oatmeal. He gave the box of oatmeal a shake and exhaled in relief. There

was enough food for breakfast and lunch. And since it was Saturday, Gregor wouldn't even need to eat at home. He'd be going over to help Mrs. Cormaci.

Mrs. Cormaci. It was strange how in a few short months she had changed from being their nosy neighbor into a kind of guardian angel. Shortly after Gregor, Boots, and their dad had returned from the Underland, he'd run into her in the hallway.

"So, where've you been, Mister?" she asked him. "Besides scaring the whole building to death." Gregor had given her the story his family had agreed upon: On the day he'd disappeared from the laundry room, he'd taken Boots out to the playground to play for a few minutes. They'd run into his dad, who was on his way to see his sick uncle in Virginia and wanted to take the kids with him. Gregor thought his dad had called his mom; his dad thought Gregor had called his mom; it wasn't until they got back that they realized what a crisis they'd caused.

"Hmph," said Mrs. Cormaci, giving him a hard look. "I thought your father was living in California."

"He was," said Gregor. "But now he's back with us."

"I see," Mrs. Cormaci again. "So, that's your story?"

Gregor nodded, knowing it was pretty lame.

“Hmph,” said Mrs. Cormaci again. “Well, I’d work on that if I were you.” And she walked off without another word.

Gregor thought she was mad at them, but a few days later she’d knocked on the door with a coffee cake. “I brought your father a coffee cake,” she said. “It’s a welcome-home thing. Is he here?”

He hadn’t wanted to let her in, but his dad called out in a false, cheerful voice, “Is that Mrs. Cormaci?” and she’d bustled right in with her cake. The sight of his dad — bone thin, white-haired, hunched over on the couch — pulled her up short. If she had planned to interrogate him, she let it go right there. Instead, she exchanged a few comments about the weather and left.

Then, a couple of weeks after school started, his mom came in one evening with some news. “Mrs. Cormaci wants to hire you to help her on Saturdays,” she said.

“Help her?” Gregor asked warily. “Help her do what?” He didn’t want to help Mrs. Cormaci. She’d ask him a bunch of questions and probably want to read his future with her deck of tarot cards and —

“I don’t know. Help her around her apartment. You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to. But I thought

it might be a nice way for you to make some pocket money,” said his mom.

And Gregor knew then that he would do it and forget about pocket money, forget about money for movies and comic books and stuff. He’d use the money for his family. Because even though his dad was home, there was no way he could go back to his job as a science teacher. He had only left the apartment a few times, and that was to go to the doctor. The six of them were living on what his mom could make. And with the medical bills, and school supplies, and clothes and food and rent and every other thing you had to have to live, it wasn’t stretching far enough.

“What time does she want me there?” asked Gregor.

“She said ten would be good,” said his mom.

That first Saturday, several months ago, there hadn’t been much food in the apartment, either, so Gregor had just gulped down a couple of glasses of water and headed over to Mrs. Cormaci’s. When she opened the door, the rich smell of something amazing hit him, filling his mouth with so much saliva that he had to swallow hard before he said hi.

“Oh, good, you came,” said Mrs. Cormaci. “Follow me.”

Feeling awkward, Gregor followed her into her kitchen. A gigantic pot of sauce was bubbling away on the stove. Another pot contained lasagna noodles. Piles of vegetables covered the counter. “There’s a fund-raiser tonight at my church and I said I’d bring lasagna. Don’t ask me why.” Mrs. Cormaci dumped several ladles of sauce into a bowl, stuck a big wedge of bread in it, clunked it on the table, and pushed Gregor into a chair before it. “Taste it.”

Gregor looked at her, unsure.

“Taste it! I have to know if it’s fit to be served,” insisted Mrs. Cormaci.

He dipped the bread into the sauce and took a bite. It was so good, his eyes watered. “Boy,” he said, when he had swallowed.

“You hate it. It’s revolting. I should throw the whole pot out and go buy jar sauce from the grocery,” said Mrs. Cormaci.

“No!” said Gregor, alarmed. “No. It’s the best sauce I ever tasted!”

Mrs. Cormaci slapped a spoon down beside him. “Then eat it and wash your hands, with soap, because you’ve got chopping to do.”

After he'd inhaled the sauce and bread, she set him to work chopping piles of vegetables that she sautéed in olive oil. He mixed eggs and spices into ricotta cheese. They layered big, flat noodles and cheese and sauce and vegetables into three enormous pans. He helped her wash up, and she declared it was time for lunch.

They had tuna salad sandwiches in her dining room while Mrs. Cormaci talked about her three kids, who were all grown and lived in different states, and Mr. Cormaci, who'd passed away five years ago. Gregor vaguely remembered him as a nice man who had given him quarters and, one time, a baseball card. "Not a day goes by that I don't miss him," said Mrs. Cormaci. Then she brought out a pound cake.

After lunch, Gregor helped her clean out a closet and carried a few boxes down to her storage space. At two o'clock, she said he was done. She had not asked any questions about him except how he liked school. She sent him out the door with forty bucks, a winter coat that had belonged to her daughter when she was little, and a lasagna. When he tried to object, she just said, "I can't take three lasagnas to the fund-raiser. People take two. You walk in with three and everybody thinks

you're a big show-off. And what? I'm going to eat it? With my cholesterol? Take it. Eat it. Go. I'll see you next Saturday." And she closed the door in his face.

It was too much. All of it. But he could surprise his mom and buy groceries and maybe some lightbulbs since three lamps were out in the house. Lizzie needed a coat. And the lasagna . . . somehow that was the best part of all. Suddenly he wanted to knock on the door and tell Mrs. Cormaci the truth about the Underland and everything that had happened and that he was sorry that he had lied to her. But he couldn't. . . .

Gregor was jolted out of his memory when Lizzie padded into the kitchen in her pajamas. She was small for her age, but the look of concern on her face made her look older than seven. "Is there any food for today?" she asked.

"Sure, there's plenty," said Gregor, trying to sound like he hadn't been worried himself. "Look, you guys can have this oatmeal for breakfast, and peanut butter sandwiches for lunch. I'll go ahead and make the oatmeal now."

Lizzie wasn't allowed to use the stove, but she opened the cabinet with the bowls. She counted out four and then hesitated. "Are you eating breakfast or —?"