

HOLLY RIVERS



Chicken
House

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Text © Holly Rivers 2023
Illustrations © Rachael Dean 2023

First published in Great Britain in 2023
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5F, Republic of Ireland

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Cover and interior design by Steve Wells
Cover and interior illustration by Rachael Dean
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed in Great Britain by Clays, Elcograf S.p.A



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-912626-05-2
eISBN 978-1-915026-75-0

For my parents, Toby and Siân.

I love you both with a cherry on top.

And for Courtney, who loved eating ice cream by the sea.

Also by Holly Rivers

Demelza & the Spectre Detectives

The Boy in the Post



‘Free ice cream! Free ice cream!’

Kipling Brock burst into the Mailbox Menagerie, making Orinthia, Séafra and Taber jump. The three Shalloo siblings had been mucking out the animal enclosures all morning, and were now throwing fistfuls of mackerel to Geronimo and Gungho, the pelicans – their first bucketful of the day.

‘Kipling, what are you talking about?’ said Orinthia, looking up and pushing a strand of dark hair behind her ear.

Kipling, rosy-cheeked and button-nosed, threw

down his satchel and ran to his friends' side. 'There's a new ice cream van in the village!' he exclaimed breathlessly. 'And they're giving away free cones *today!*' He took a folded paper flyer from his pocket and opened it up. 'Look . . . !'

Orinthia wiped her fishy hands down the front of her overalls, before taking the paper and reading aloud.

**TWO SCOOPS CREAMERY
INVITES YOU TO THE GALA OPENING
OF OUR NEW ICE CREAM VAN**

Free cones for the first 100 customers

**Sunday 1 August from 9 A.M.
Little Penhallow Village Green**

'Sounds good, right?' enthused Kipling, standing over Orinthia as she read.

Orinthia nodded eagerly. At nearly fourteen, she knew that she probably shouldn't be feeling quite this excited about ice cream, but the first week of the summer holidays had already been a scorcher, and with the weather set to become increasingly warm this afternoon, a vanilla cone with a chocolate flake would *definitely* be a very welcome start to the day.

'What do you think, Tabs?' she asked, turning to her youngest brother. 'You fancy an ice cream?'

Taber didn't need to say a word – the way the scruffy-haired seven-year-old was jumping from foot to foot with a huge grin plastered across his face was answer enough. 'I'm going to bring Gungho!' he said, reaching into the pelican enclosure and scooping out the smallest of the two bucket-beaked birds. 'He can have a fly around over the green!'

'OK, but we need to leave now,' said Kipling, pointing urgently to the time on the flyer. 'We have to get there sharpish if we want to be one of the first hundred customers!' He flung the back of his hand to his forehead in his usual dramatic way. 'It would be an utter *tragedy* to miss out!'

Orinthia nodded, and was just unbuttoning her work overalls when Séafra cut in. At twelve years old he was nearly as tall as her now: lanky and growing by the day. 'Erm, I hate to spoil your plans,' he said. 'But there's still quite a lot of chores to finish here before we get ready for this afternoon's deliveries.' He nodded to the daily work rota pinned to the noticeboard on the far wall. 'The guinea pigs need brushing. The rats need their claws trimming before any more letters are ripped to shreds. And one of the porcupines' mailbags needs darning. We don't want to get in trouble with Grandy Brock.'

Orinthia tutted. She couldn't believe that despite everything they'd been through last summer, Séafra *still* insisted on being so sensible, so cautious. The sense of adventure he'd managed to muster while crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a freight crate hadn't lasted very long at all. And as much as she took her responsibilities at the Mailbox Menagerie very seriously, it was definitely OK to bend the rules occasionally (especially when free ice cream was concerned)!

'Relax, Séa,' she said, giving her brother a playful punch on the shoulder. 'Grandy Brock's busy doing paperwork in his office. We'll be there and back before he's even noticed we've gone. And I promise we'll get everything done before the animails go out on their first delivery.'

Séafra huffed in the way he always did when feeling under pressure. 'Fine. But we can't stay out too long.'

Kipling nodded and, cupping his hands around his mouth, wasted no time in shouting out to his siblings. 'Hey! You lot! Who wants free ice cream?'

His words rang through the verdant glass domes of the menagerie, echoing around the vivariums and fish tanks, aviaries and pens. Obviously intrigued by the sudden clamour, Petunia the octopus propelled herself

through the waters of her tank, before suckering herself to its glass frontage like a puckered orange star. Soon enough more of the animails looked up to see what was going on – raccoons scampered from their straw beds, monkeys swung through overhanging plants, and toucans swooped down from their perches. Even Zeno and Zelda, the Sphynx cats, took a moment to extend their long necks in observation, before returning to their saucers of milk.

‘Did you just say what I thought you said?’ shouted Peggy from up in the rafters. She was feeding chunks of ripe banana to Titus the fruit bat, who had just returned from his night shift and was now hanging upside down from his perch. ‘Free ice cream?’

Kipling looked upwards. ‘Yes! But only for the first hundred customers! We need to head to the village green NOW!’

Peggy nodded eagerly, and within a flash she’d hooked a leg around a nearby vine and was sliding down at breakneck speed. Titus the bat let out a loud *click-click* sound in protest. ‘Sorry boy!’ she shouted back as her feet hit the ground. ‘But you’re going to have to finish eating your breakfast alone today!’

By that point the rest of the Brock children, who had obviously overheard the exuberant commotion,

had joined the huddle. Suki, the eldest of the brood, was half-drenched with water, having just given Bettina the pygmy hippo her monthly bath – always a soggy affair. Bramwell had a metre-long python hanging over his shoulders and was grappling with the tiny tree frog that was nesting amongst his tight black curls.

The smallest of the siblings, who had until recently gone by the nickname *Milky*, was now called Caspian – a moniker which Grandy Brock thought really suited the adventurous toddler (and one that would be much less a source of embarrassment for him in the future!). The toddler was naked apart from a cloth nappy secured with a large safety pin and came scooting forth on his bottom with a tiny white kitten on his lap. ‘Ice cweeeam,’ he garbled, wiggling his podgy fingers with glee. ‘Me want ice cweeeeam!’

‘Yes, we’re going to go and get some,’ said Kipling, shooing away the kitten before hauling his little brother up on to his hip. ‘Everyone else up for it?’

The rest of the Brocks nodded enthusiastically, wide-eyed. ‘YEEEEES!’

‘Well, what are we waiting for?’ Kipling replied, looking as if he were about to explode with excitement. ‘Let’s go!’

In a flurry of enthusiasm, the children tugged off their wellington boots and unbuttoned their overalls, all the while chatting eagerly about what flavour cones they were going to order.

‘I’m definitely going to have strawberry!’ said Bramwell, licking his lips.

‘Lemon sorbet for me,’ said Suki.

‘I wonder if they’ll have knickerbocker glories?’

‘With strawberry sauce!’

‘And chopped nuts!’

‘And hot chocolate fudge!’

Having made sure that all of the animal enclosures were securely shut, the gang made their way through the menagerie. But just as they were about to make their escape, the office door burst open. ‘What’s all of this caterwauling? Doesn’t sound like there’s much work being done in here.’

The children wheeled round to find Grandy Brock on the threshold, with Mr Malagasy, his ring-tailed lemur, perched atop his shoulder. Despite the heat the old man was wearing his usual three-piece suit, and had his favourite hunting hat pulled down over his head of rapidly whitening hair.

‘We were . . . erm . . . just discussing what animals still needed feeding,’ improvised Peggy.

‘Well, that’s funny,’ said Grandy Brock, raising one of his bushy grey eyebrows. ‘Because I’m sure I heard someone mention *knickerbocker glories*. And I don’t recall any of my animals being fed on a diet of desserts!’

The children looked to the floor sheepishly.

‘Well? Is someone going to tell me what’s *really* going on?’ pressed Grandy Brock.

Suki, caving under her father’s glare, stepped forward. ‘There’s a new ice cream van in the village and they’re giving away free cones today.’

‘I see,’ said Grandy Brock, crossing his arms. ‘And you were going to abandon your duties to go and get one, I presume?’

‘We weren’t going to be long,’ insisted Bramwell. ‘We promise!’

‘Please can we go, Grandy?’ pleaded Peggy, clasping her hands together as if in prayer. ‘Pleeeeeease?’

The old man paused for a moment before smiling wryly. ‘Of course you can! You’d be fools to miss out! But come straight back, OK?’

There was a huge cheer from the children, and having reached for their sun hats, they were out of the front door in a flash.