

CHAPTER ONE

A BOOKWORM THROUGH AND THROUGH



The books were talking again. In whispers, all hushed and anxious. My ears pricked up, but only a few words stood out from the rustle of pages and ink, and those words were *trouble* and *danger* and *warn her*.

Which seemed unnecessarily dramatic for a drippy, dreary Monday morning in May. Trouble and danger were supposed to come on dark and stormy Thursday nights in December, when the moon was no more than a sliver in the sky and frost had spiderwebbed its way over the windowpanes. Monday mornings in May, on the other hand, were good for nothing more than grey splutters of rain and soggy lettuce in my sandwiches.

I mumbled as much to *An Incomplete Guide to Good Manners*, which happened to be the book propped open under my cheek, but the book only

tutted disapprovingly and said, ‘You drool in your sleep. Did you know that? Because I can tell you that poor page one hundred and fifty-two knows it only too well.’

‘I’ll make it up to you,’ I promised sleepily, too tired to even open my eyes.

I’d almost drifted back to sleep, with the rustle of the whispering books in the background, when the voice of *The Pocket Compendium of Poisons* suddenly rose above the others. ‘There’s trouble afoot,’ she hissed, sharp as a paper cut. ‘Make no mistake, it’s almost at our door. We have to warn her.’

‘That’ll just frighten her, dear,’ came the sweet, gentle voice of *Lady Firoza’s Encyclopaedia of Flowers*.

‘She *should* be afraid,’ said *Poisons*. ‘That’s the whole point of a *warning*, you disgraceful softie.’

‘Dial back the venom, darling,’ *Lady Firoza* replied placidly. ‘Warning her will do no good. You know what she’s like.’

There was a pause, and then *Poisons* said, with grudging agreement, ‘Then we should warn the parents.’

‘They don’t hear us.’ That was the deep, gruff voice of *The Fantastical Bestiary*. ‘They never do.’

‘We’ll have to be louder. We’ll have to make them hear us.’

Wait a minute. I pried one groggy eye open. *You know what she’s like*. That was what *Lady Firoza* had said. What was that supposed to mean? What did they think I was like? And what did it have to do with the mysterious thing they wanted to warn me about?



I felt betrayed. These books were the ones who understood me. At least, they were supposed to. They weren't supposed to be the ones who said things like *You know what she's like* in a way that definitely didn't sound like a compliment.

'Vanya?'

The sound of my name, and the hand on my shoulder, brought me fully awake. I lifted my head off the pages of *Good Manners*, which prompted a snarky cry of 'Oh, thank Gutenberg!' from the book, and blinked groggily up at the tall, rumped, geeky man standing over me, his brown eyes glinting behind his glasses.

'Hi, Dad,' I said, stifling a yawn. 'What time is it?'

'Quarter past seven.' Dad gave me a wry look. 'This is the third time in a week, cherub. You can't keep sneaking down here in the middle of the night and dozing off. You'll do your neck in.'

'Her neck?' *Good Manners* repeated indignantly. 'What about me? Have you seen the drool she left behind?'

Dad didn't react. He and Mum never seemed to hear the books, so I pretended I couldn't hear them, either. I couldn't bear to admit, even to them, that

there was yet another thing about me that wasn't like everyone else.

'I like it here,' I said. 'Maybe if we moved all these books to my bedroom, I'd stay up there all night.'

'These books,' Dad said, looking amused, 'are rare, priceless pieces of art, as you well know, and must stay right here in the annexe. They cannot live in a ten-year-old's bedroom.'

'An eleven-year-old's bedroom,' I reminded him. It had only been eight days since my eleventh birthday, so Mum and Dad still slipped up out of habit.

'So it is,' said Dad. 'Obnoxious of you, really, to keep growing like this.'

I grinned. All my joints popped and my muscles protested as I stood up, almost knocking over the chair I'd fallen asleep in. Even standing, I still had to look up at Dad. I was on the smaller side for my age, but not that small. He was just *really* tall. Like a beanstalk.

Dad shut the book I'd been reading, eyeing the cover dubiously. '*An Incomplete Guide to Good Manners*. Really? It's no wonder you fell asleep.'

The book let out an affronted sputter, but Dad wasn't wrong: it was old, outdated, and very, very boring. 'It only arrived yesterday,' I said, shrugging.

‘I thought I’d give it a go.’

I glanced at the wall shelf above the desk, where *The Pocket Compendium of Poisons*, *Lady Firoza’s Encyclopaedia of Flowers*, and *The Fantastical Bestiary* were stacked with about a dozen other old, dusty tomes. They’d gone quiet since Dad had woken me, but I could practically see *Poisons* quivering with suppressed urgency.

I’d been eight or nine years old when I’d first started hearing the books. I had always loved this little annexe, tucked at the back of my parents’ bookshop, with its old stone walls, wood shelves, and the oak desk in the corner with the faded tan armchair that was *so* comfy to sit on. We lived right above the bookshop, but I had more memories of being down here than I did of being up there. Mum and Dad had always let me have the run of the place. They knew that even when I was distracted (I was always distracted), or in a rush (I was always in a rush because I could never keep track of time), or in a temper (that happened sometimes), I would never, ever be careless with the books. They were safe with me.

Aside from a little drool now and then.

The books in the bookshop, in the twisty, quirky, low-ceilinged front room where people wandered in

and out all day, never talked. My schoolbooks never talked. Other books in other bookshops I’d been to never talked. It was only ever these few books in the annexe, the ones that arrived in the dead of night every few months, the ones that were kept behind a door and away from the public. Their voices had sounded like nothing more than white noise to me at first, just a rustle of paper and the wet slick of ink, and I hadn’t thought much of it. Then, weeks later, I started noticing actual, proper words coming out of the noise.

When the books had found out I could hear them, they’d been delighted to have someone else to talk to, but they’d fallen quickly into the habit of going quiet whenever Mum or Dad was in the annexe with us. They had realized it was almost impossible for me to act normal and talk to other people if I was constantly distracted by whatever *they* were saying.

But now, habit or not, I could tell *Poisons* was about to crack. I wouldn’t mind if she did; I wanted to know what she and the others had meant when they’d mentioned trouble and danger, even though, knowing them, they were probably just being dramatic. Mostly, I wanted to know what they’d meant by *You know what she’s like*.

‘Vanya!’ That was Mum’s exasperated voice, floating down from our flat above the shop. She’d probably called my name a few times already and I’d been too busy inside my own head to hear her. As usual. ‘Vanya Vallen! Get up here and get dressed before you’re late for school again!’

‘Off you go, pup,’ said Dad, wincing sheepishly. I assumed he hadn’t heard her first few attempts, either. He was almost as bad as me.

Dad loved nicknames. The weirder and sillier, the better. *Cherub* and *pup* were actually pretty normal by his standards. I’d been called *Gruffalo cupcake*, *chocolate sprinkle*, *monkey toes*, and, on one memorable occasion in the middle of a garden centre, he’d called me his *pint-sized huntress*, which had earned him a few side-eyes from little old ladies buying armfuls of plant pots and a glare so furious and Medusa-like from Mum that I was honestly amazed he hadn’t turned to stone on the spot.

He’d never repeated that one.

Just outside the annexe, a tucked-away flight of stairs led up to our flat. I clomped barefoot up the creaky steps, opened our front door, and stuck my head in the doorway to the little kitchen. ‘Sorry,’ I said sheepishly.

‘You’d think I’d be used to it by now,’ Mum said good-naturedly, rolling her eyes at me over her shoulder. She was at the counter, her back to the doorway, her left arm stretched awkwardly above her head as she tried to open the cupboard where we kept the tea. ‘Ow. Ow. *Ow*.’

I watched her anxiously. Today was a bad day for her. She could never raise her right arm over her head, but she could usually reach the tea with her left. On days like today, though, the old, knotted pink scar that ran from her right shoulder all the way down to the bottom of her back hurt more than it did most other days.

I often saw the top of the scar peeking out of Mum’s shirts when her back was turned, but I’d only ever seen the whole scar once. She had never told me how she’d got it, just that she’d had it since she was nineteen years old. I’d tried asking Dad, but he’d just said it was Mum’s business and it was up to her to tell me if she wanted to.

‘Mum, let me get the tea,’ I said quickly. I stood on my toes to reach the cupboard, my fingertips grasping the box of teabags inside. I pulled it out and put it down on the counter. ‘I can make it if you want to sit down.’

‘No, Vanya, you cannot,’ said Mum, picking up the kettle and moving it out of my reach like she thought I might hold it hostage. ‘What you *can* do is get ready for school before I get yet another phone call from Kelly about your chronic tardiness.’

I scowled. She scowled back. Our scowls were very alike, but hers won. I could never hold mine in place for long.

People who met us for the first time always said I was a miniature version of my mother. I could kind of see what they meant. Dad was tall and loose and always thrumming with energy, which made him seem even bigger than he was. Mum and I, on the other hand, were smaller, quieter and tightly wound, our shoulders always just a little stiff. She was more willowy and graceful than me, but maybe I’d be more like that when I was older. And while all three of us had dark brown eyes and dark brown hair, Dad’s skin was a deep goldeny brown, while Mum and I were more like a light brownish gold. The heart shape of our faces and the curl at the ends of our hair were practically identical. Dad always seemed full of light, open to the world and excited about everything, but in Mum and me, it was like

the light needed a lot of coaxing to show itself.

I left Mum to it. Out in the hallway, my bedroom door stood open. There were gold stickers on the outside of the door, spelling out LAVANYA in shiny block letters. I hadn’t used my full name in forever, but I’d never peeled the first two stickers off. I kept meaning to, but like a lot of things I kept meaning to do, I’d just never got round to doing it.

I kicked off my pyjamas and picked my way across my room, sidestepping all the unfinished projects on the floor. I fished my scratchy school uniform out of my wardrobe, put it on reluctantly, and went back to the kitchen to eat a slice of toast smothered in lavender jam.

Mum was now at the table, her hands wrapped around her cup of tea. She smiled. ‘Tea can fix just about anything,’ she said, taking a blissful sip as I crammed almost the whole slice of toast into my mouth. Even from the other side of the table, I could smell the spices in her cup. ‘When I was little, my mother would—’

She stopped abruptly, looking shocked, like she couldn’t believe she’d been so careless. I knew she wouldn’t continue.

She cleared her throat. ‘Never mind. Don’t forget to brush your teeth before you leave.’

I forgot a lot of things, like half the shopping list if I didn’t write it down, or the date of a test if I didn’t put it in my laptop’s Reminders app, or, sometimes, even something as basic as brushing my teeth.

‘Did you email the school?’ I asked Mum. ‘With the paperwork from the GP?’

‘Last night.’

‘Miss Gatsby won’t like it,’ I sighed. ‘She doesn’t approve of *labels*.’

‘Well, I don’t approve of Miss Gatsby, so there,’ Mum said crossly. I giggled. ‘Of all the brilliant teachers at that school, *how* you got stuck with her is beyond me . . .’

I had ADHD, and after a lot of long, *incredibly* boring tests and assessments, we now had paperwork confirming it. This was supposed to be a good thing, because it meant that a lot of the things I’d thought were me being lazy and just a bit rubbish (forgetting things, lying on my bed doing nothing even when I *knew* I had stuff to do, daydreaming, etcetera, etcetera) weren’t actually lazy or rubbish at all. They were just the way my brain worked. My GP told me my teachers

would understand, but my GP had obviously never met Miss Gatsby.

‘Speaking of Miss Gatsby, your homework was still on your desk when I checked in on you last night,’ Mum went on, tweaking my nose. ‘Don’t forget to take it with you.’

I finished my toast, brushed my teeth, put one shoe on, and spent five minutes looking for the other shoe. (It was in my box of LEGO bricks. How?!)

On my way out of the flat, I spotted a familiar sight in the open kitchen window: a snow-white mongoose. It sat on the sill, sunning itself. Its adorably chubby face turned in my direction and a pair of big brown eyes met mine. I raised one hand in a wave, and the mongoose raised one paw and waved back. It winked.

‘The mongoose is back,’ I said to Mum, who was now on her second cup of tea.

She didn’t turn to look, but her shoulders went stiffer than usual and the corners of her mouth tightened. ‘I should drop it off at the shelter,’ she said idly.

There was a snort from the mongoose.

‘Mum, you do know it’s *super* weird that a mongoose a) is in this country, b) is white’ – I ticked each item off on my fingers – ‘and c) is capable

of waving and winking at me?’

‘I’m not a zoologist, Vanya,’ Mum said, shrugging. ‘For all we know, this could be normal for a mongoose.’

I scoffed and picked my school satchel up off the floor. ‘If you say so. See you later.’

Mum opened her eyes. Her face softened. ‘Love you,’ she said, like she always did. ‘Don’t forget the rules.’

‘I won’t,’ I said, like I always did. ‘Love you, too.’

I’d been making the ten-minute walk to school by myself for at least six months now, but Mum never let me leave the house without reminding me of the rules.

Walk straight there and back. Don’t follow any strangers, no matter how prettily they sing. And never, ever set foot in the Gildencroft.

We lived in the middle of Norwich, which was probably one of the quieter, mellower cities in Britain, but still, the first rule was the kind of thing a lot of parents said to their kids. The second and third rules? Definitely not the kind of thing a lot of parents said to their kids. I had no idea why Mum was afraid I might go off with *any* stranger, let alone a *singing* one, and as for the Gildencroft, well, that made no sense, either.

The Gildencroft was a small, old part of the city

about a mile away from the bookshop. As far as I knew, it had a park and some historic houses and was basically no different from any other part of Norwich. And for some reason, I was forbidden to go near it.

Like the white mongoose and the scar on Mum’s back, the Gildencroft was just one more question to which I never got any straight answers.

The books were whispering urgently amongst themselves as I bounded down the stairs and passed the open door to the annexe. Instead of going in to see them like I wanted to, I turned the other way. ‘Love you, Dad!’ I called as I left the bookshop through the front door.

‘Love you, mushroom!’ came a muffled yell from somewhere in the back. ‘Go be a superhero!’

Dad was *so* cringey.

Fat, cold droplets of rain splattered the top of my head as I jogged down the cobblestone street, my long hair blowing wildly in the wind and my satchel bouncing against my back. I paused to pet the lazy black cat that could often be found dozing on a sunny wall near the shop. It didn’t seem to care about the drizzle. My mind jumped around like it always did, darting like a hummingbird from one thought to the next.

You know what she's like.

Those words gnawed at me, like a mouse chewing at the edges of a wedge of cheese, because it was something people only ever said about me when they were exasperated or annoyed. It was what Katie Prendergast had said when she and I had been paired up for a project in computing. It was what my mother had said to my father the time I'd gone to the supermarket and forgotten the pasta. It was what my teachers wrote in every school report.

The books in the annexe weren't supposed to say it, too.

I was literally at the school gates when it hit me, all of a sudden, that I'd forgotten my homework. The exact thing Mum told me not to forget.

I turned around and ran. It was going to take me at least twenty minutes to get all the way home, get my homework, and run back, but I was pretty sure that I'd get in less trouble for being late than I would for not handing in my homework.

As I hurtled up to the front door of the bookshop, something in the pane of glass caught my eye. I stopped short. It was a rustic wooden sign with a rainbow painted across the top and the words SORRY, WE'RE

CLOSED! printed underneath in white letters.

Closed? At a quarter past nine on a Monday morning? Dad *always* opened the shop at bang on nine o'clock.

I tried the door. It opened.

And suddenly, all I could hear were the voices of the books.

They were screaming.