

PROLOGUE

# OUT OF THE RAIN

Young Master Rourke sat upright in his armchair, startled awake by a sudden noise. Despite his name, he was actually an old man, only a few days short of his eighty-fifth birthday. He was known as “Young Master Rourke” because his father had been the one and only “Mister Rourke” in the area for many, many years. Old Mister Rourke had built Rourke Castle and had bought up all the railways, shipping lines, and the whaling stations for miles around. In doing so, he’d become one of the richest and most influential men of his time.

Most of the riches were now gone, but Young Master Rourke still owned Rourke Castle. A vast, rambling palace that extended across two sides of a hill, it had towers, stables, three ballrooms, a Greek temple, a Venetian canal, and a scale copy of an Egyptian pyramid that was a hundred feet high. (The pyramid looked like stone on the outside but was in fact hollow, made of concrete slabs over a steel skeleton.)

Rourke Castle was so big that it was spread across two towns. Half was within the bounds of a small town called Portland, the other half in the neighboring town. When the castle had still had staff, they’d used to joke about going to Portland or going to Dogton when crossing from one side of the castle to the other.

Over the years more and more of the castle had been locked up and left, as it was too expensive to maintain. Young Master Rourke kept moving from larger rooms to smaller ones as his needs shrank. Finally he left the main castle entirely and moved to the old porter's lodge near the front gates, past the lake that had once boasted real icebergs and penguins, even in summer. Now the giant ice machine was broken and the penguins had been sent to a proper zoo. The lake was just a dark expanse of water, choked by rotten lilies.

The lodge and the land around it were half a mile outside the boundary of Portland. Rourke had not thought this important when he moved. He had forgotten that someone had once told him that he should take care to stay on the Portland side of the boundary at all times.

The sound that had woken him came again. Young Master Rourke tilted his head back as he tried to work out what it was. The grandfather clock in the corner of the room ticked slowly and melancholically, but that wasn't it. The time was five minutes short of midnight and the clock far from striking.

The night was quiet for a few seconds. Then the noise came a third time — a quick rush of beats that swept across the roof and were gone.

"Is that . . . rain?" muttered Young Master Rourke, blinking the sleep from his eyes.

He took off his half-moon reading glasses and consulted the ornate, gilded barometer that stood next to the grandfather clock.

The barometer's needle was sitting at FAIR.

"Stupid thing," Young Master Rourke mumbled.

He struggled out of his deep leather armchair and crossed the room to tap the face of the barometer, firmly.

The needle quivered, then moved, but not toward STORMY. It kept insisting the weather should be fair.

Another round of what sounded like heavy raindrops crossed the roof. Rourke went to the window and looked out. There were still a few working lampposts on the broad avenue that went up toward the castle, alongside the lake. Above, the sky was cloudy and utterly empty of stars, but Rourke couldn't see any actual rain.

"Just a shower, you daft old fool," he told himself. "Forget about it and go to bed."

He bent down and picked up the book he'd been reading, his mood improving instantly. Rourke had read *Gorillas vs The Fist* before, but it was one of many favorites that he often revisited. Reading pulpy old detective stories was one of his two main activities. The other one was looking after the only legacy of his father's that he actually treasured: the animals of the old Rourke Menagerie.

In his father's time, the menagerie had contained elephants, lions, tigers, and other kinds of exotic animals. Now there were only two chimpanzees, a warthog, three lemurs, a zebra, a jackal, two wolves, and a macaw named Cornelia, who was at least a hundred years old. (When Young Master Rourke had been much younger, he'd believed that Cornelia had been stolen from a pirate.)

In old Mister Rourke's day all the animals had been housed in a complete zoo, up past the eastern wing of the castle. But that area was a weedy wasteland now. The remaining animals lived in a much smaller collection of cages and enclosures built on the old polo field right next to the lodge where Young Master Rourke lived. It was nowhere near as impressive as the grand old menagerie had been, but it was closer and much easier to deal with.

The new cages were also outside Portland's boundary. Rattling rain fell on the roof again as Rourke shuffled out of his study into the lodge's main corridor. This time, when the heavy beat of the drops ceased, a sudden, loud bang immediately followed, then a much heavier thudding along the roof.

"That's not rain. . . ." whispered Rourke, looking up to follow the sound as it traveled toward the back of the lodge. His heart was suddenly thumping in his chest, faster than was good for him. "That's footsteps."

The sound stopped. Rourke's head snapped back down as a man-shaped shadow passed across the narrow stained-glass window to the left of the back door.

There was someone out there — someone who had apparently come down with the rain.

It was only then that Rourke remembered the warning about staying inside the Portland town limits, and what might happen if he didn't. . . .

The book was still in his hand. He raised it, gnarled old fingers moving faster than anyone might expect, and flipped it open to the back page, where there was a simple white sticker with a phone number and address of a business in Portland.

Rourke stumbled to the ancient phone that sat on a seventeenth-century chestnut table in the corridor and put one shaking finger into the rotary dial.

At that moment he heard Cornelia the macaw, who had a free run of the new menagerie but most often slept in a custom-made box under the eaves at the back door of the lodge. Cornelia normally never said anything but "Who's a pretty girl?" and "Nellie wants a nut." Now she started shrieking.

"To the boats! Abandon ship!"

The other animals started braying and screaming and kicking, making noises that Rourke had never heard, not in all his long lifetime spent looking after them. They were hooting and howling, barking and biting, shaking their cages and filling the night with unnatural terror.

Frantically, Rourke dialed the number.

As the dial whirred in its final rotation, the noise of the animals suddenly stopped, as if a conductor had snapped down his arms for a sudden finish.

Rourke held the phone to his ear, hardly hearing the sound of ringing at the other end. All his senses were focused toward the back door and the menagerie beyond.

The animals were quiet now, but there were other noises. Cages were swinging open, one by one. These sounds were familiar to Rourke, who opened them every day. There was the screech of the chimps' door, the one he had been meaning to oil for weeks. There was the scrape of steel on concrete, the bent door in the fence that surrounded the wolves' enclosure. . . .

The phone kept ringing, and now Rourke could hear animals moving. Much more quietly than normal, though he still heard the soft pads of the jackal, the hooves of the zebra, and the shuffling gait of the warthog. The wolves, he assumed, remained stealthy, moving with their characteristic silence.

"What?" asked a tired voice on the phone. A man, grumpy at being woken up so late.

Rourke's mouth opened and closed. He struggled to speak but couldn't get any air into his lungs. The uncaged animals were at the back door now — he could see their shadows against the stained glass.

"No!" he tried to say, the word emerging as little more than a croak. "No!"

The handle of the back door slowly turned. The door edged open.

“Who is this?” asked the voice on the phone.

The back door swung open. A man stood there, a man wearing a hat and a trench coat just like the one on the cover of Rourke’s book, except both were thoroughly wet. Water dripped from the brim of the hat that shadowed this man’s face.

The animals were gathered around the stranger, silent companions pressing in as close as they could as he eased through the doorway.

“David?” the old man gasped.

There was something very odd about the animals. It took Rourke a second to process exactly what it was.

“Their eyes . . .” gasped Rourke. “Their eyes are white!”

The phone fell from his hand as the man in the door lifted his head to stare at him. The shadow of the man’s hat brim rose and light fell on his face, reflecting from his eyes — eyes that, just like the animals’ eyes, were utterly white, without pupil or iris.

**++Where is it, old fool?++** asked the intruder. No sound came from his mouth, and his lips did not move, but the voice was clear in Rourke’s mind. **++Where is it?++**

Rourke opened his mouth but only a choking rattle came out. His hand flew to his head, as if he could ward off the stabbing, awful communication that was going straight into his brain.

**++Answer the question!++**

Rourke suddenly clawed at his chest with both hands. *Gorillas vs The Fist* fluttered forgotten to the floor.

**++No!++** shouted the stranger. He dashed forward and caught Rourke as he fell.

White began to swirl in Rourke's eyes, too, but it could not outpace the other change that gripped the old man.

Young Master Rourke went limp. The life ebbed from his eyes, leaving them open and unseeing.

The stranger lowered the heavy body to the floor. He grabbed the phone and pulled it from the wall, the cord coming out with a piece of plaster the size of a dinner plate. Then he bent down and searched through the pockets of Rourke's dressing gown.

Without any sign or gesture from the stranger, the two white-eyed chimpanzees went into the study, while the other animals silently roamed the study as though looking for something.

The stranger flicked through the pages of Young Master Rourke's book. As he did so, a thick, gray mist formed above him and several heavy drops of rain fell onto his back. He paused and looked up, and made an angry dismissive gesture that caused the mist and rain to immediately disappear.

In the study, the chimpanzees began to move books out of the bookcases, carefully opening each one before dropping it disinterestedly onto the floor. The wolves circled Rourke's fallen body, sniffing his pockets.

"It *must* be here," whispered the stranger, using his voice this time. It sounded strangely like a growl, at first neither man nor animal, but then shifted to being fully human. "But if it's not, there's always Plan B."

Behind the chimps, the clock shook. Springs whirred inside its cavernous casing, cogs grated, and a chime sounded the first of twelve strokes of midnight.

The sound echoed through the lodge and, faintly but clearly, outside. The ancient macaw, hiding in the topmost

branches of one of the great elms that lined the castle avenue, heard the clock and lowered her proud-beaked head.

“Every parrot for herself,” she muttered, and launched herself into the air, beginning a slow but steady flight to the east, toward the shimmering lights of Portland.



## CHAPTER ONE

# THE ACCIDENT

The twins were doing math questions when they heard the first siren scream past the school, heading north, and then stop not much farther on. Back in their old home in the city, they wouldn't have paid it any attention at all. But in the small town of Portland, even a single siren was unusual. When it was followed by another, as was the current case, it became almost interesting.

"That's the ambulance," said curly-haired Kyle, one of those kids who could recognize the slight individual variations in the sirens of the local emergency service vehicles. "And the second one is the fire engine. . . ."

His voice trailed off as another, more distant siren joined the mix, getting louder as it raced toward the town.

"And that's the rescue rig from Scarborough!" he exclaimed. "Something big must be going on!"

He jumped up and rushed to the window, followed by most of the class.

"Children, children!" admonished Mr. Carver, but as he didn't actually raise his voice, only the front row heard him and stayed in place.

Jack and Jaide looked at each other and didn't immediately follow, having already experienced quite a lot of disasters and emergencies in the last few weeks. Also, they were from the city and had a reputation to hold up as not

being impressed by something that probably wouldn't rate a mention on the news back home.

Over the cacophony of all the sirens, there came a deep, fast beat that the twins knew very well. The *wokka-wokka-wokka* of an approaching helicopter.

"Airswift Aeromedical 339, twin-engine," said Jaide, jumping up and angling quickly between a couple of kids to get to the window. Her brother, Jack, followed in her wake.

"How do *you* know?" asked Kyle.

"That's our mother's helicopter," said Jack. "This *must* be serious. Can you see anything?"

"Not really, but the helicopter looks like it's going to land near the iron bridge." Kyle craned up on tiptoe, trying to get a better view. "Yeah, there it goes — must be right in the middle of the road!"

"Class, I would particularly appreciate it if you would return to your seats," said Mr. Carver, still in his normal conversational voice, "while I endeavor to ascertain if this emergency affects the school."

His students didn't even turn around. The kids in back kept jostling to get to the window, while the kids in front pushed back with their elbows to stay in place.

"CHILDREN! Back to your seats!"

No one had ever heard Mr. Carver shout before. There was a moment of shock, followed by a sudden cascade of students rushing back to their desks, several of them tripping over the beanbags that were used during Mr. Carver's "meditation time." They didn't so much sit back down as do controlled crashes into their chairs.

"Continue with your math problems." Mr. Carver wasn't shouting now, but his voice was still louder than usual, clear even over the noise of the sirens and the helicopter winding down. "I am going to see what's going on. I expect

everyone to stay in their places unless requested otherwise, by me or another teacher.”

He took his phone out of his pocket as he strode out of the class, dialing with one hand as he pushed the door open with the other.

“Wow! I’ve never seen him like that before,” said Tara, the newest student in the school. “I mean, I thought he was nothing but peace and light all the time.”

“Nah, old Heath loses it occasionally,” said Kyle, using Mr. Carver’s first name, as he preferred his students to do, although few of them could ever bring themselves to do it. “Three years ago he freaked out when that tree branch fell down in the parking lot just before the bus left for the whale-watching excursion.”

“That wasn’t three years ago, Kyle,” said Miralda King, daughter of the mayor.

“Yes, it was,” Kyle snapped back.

“We went fossil-hunting on Mermaid Point three years ago,” retorted Miralda. “Whale-watching was *four* years ago.”

“Actually, it *was* three years ago,” said one of the other kids, and then all the locals who’d been at the school long enough started arguing about whether they had gone whale-watching four or three years ago, and whether or not the branch had fallen that year, or in fact some other year, when the bus was leaving for some different excursion.

“I guess you have to find your own excitement in a small town,” Tara whispered to Jaide.

“Whatever’s happening on the bridge is enough for me,” said Jaide. “I wish we could see what’s happening.”

“Can’t be too big, or we’d have to evacuate,” said Jack. “I mean, if it was a gas tanker that was going to explode or something.”

“There’s a lot of sirens,” said Jaide. “And Mom’s helicopter, so someone must be badly hurt. Maybe lots of people.”

“You know, I thought I heard something before the sirens,” said Tara. “A kind of thudding noise, like when a big truck goes past and shakes everything a bit. Just for a second.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” said Jack. “I was totally concentrating on the math questions.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Jaide. “You were practically asleep. I saw you.”

Jack shrugged. His twin knew him too well. He had finished the problems ages ago and had been daydreaming, imagining himself using his Gift, merging into the shadow by the wall and escaping from school.

“I suppose we had better do these questions,” said Tara to Jaide. “They won’t go away on their own.”

The students were bent over their papers — all except Jack, who had moved on to imagining increasingly unlikely accidents to explain the unusual events in Portland that morning — when Mr. Carver came back into the room a few minutes later. He was talking on his phone.

“So there is no danger to the school? Good, good. What exactly . . . ? Into the river? Yes, of course I know . . . oh my . . . oh my . . . oh dear!”

Jack and Jaide were not looking up, or they would have seen Mr. Carver suddenly stare at them with an expression they all knew well. His forehead had wrinkled and his mouth flattened into a straight, sincere line.

Tara saw it. She nudged Jaide.

“You just got the Caring Sharing Face from Heath.”

“What?” asked Jaide. All of a sudden she felt a stab of fear. The helicopter . . . her mother! But the helicopter had

landed fine. Why would they be the object of Mr. Carver's Caring Sharing Face?

Mr. Carver put his phone away and carefully walked among the desks, over to where Jack and Jaide sat.

"Class, continue with your work," he said brightly. "Jack and Jaide, could you please come with me to the office? There's something I'd like you to help me with."

Jack and Jaide stood up and started to gather their books.

"No, no, leave everything and come along," said Mr. Carver.

He opened the door and gestured to them to go in front of him. Out in the corridor, Jack stopped and said, "What's going on? Is Mom all right?"

"Yes, I'm sure she's fine," said Mr. Carver quickly. He made some tentative gestures again, as if he was trying to herd ducklings into his office. "Just step inside and I'll tell you when you're sitting down."

"We were sitting down before," said Jaide, as she and her brother sat uneasily on the shiny orange-and-yellow couch.

Mr. Carver perched himself on the corner of his desk and fiddled with a small Tibetan prayer wheel, flicking it till the bells began to jangle.

"Yes, but this is . . . what I have to tell you . . . it's best not in class. No, I think more suitable that you be sitting together . . . you may even want to, in fact I think it's a good idea if you hold your brother's hand, Jaide —"

"Just tell us!" both twins said at once.

"I'm not sure, I don't have all the details, but it seems that about twenty minutes ago, a car was forced off the road just before the iron bridge, into the river. . . ."

He spun the prayer wheel more forcefully.

“So?” asked Jack, now extremely puzzled. “*What* car went into the river . . . ?”

“A yellow car, an old yellow car,” whispered Mr. Carver.

It felt as if time froze for the twins, as if everything stopped. For a long second, neither of them could move, or think, or speak, and then everything started again, and Mr. Carver was gabbling about “your wonderful grandmother” but it was meaningless. All they could think about was Grandma X’s old yellow car going into the river, taking Grandma X down with it, down into the muddy depths. . . .

“But . . . but it couldn’t . . . it couldn’t happen,” Jaide said finally.

“No,” agreed Jack. “No way.”

“I know it is difficult to comprehend,” said Mr. Carver. “Fate is fickle, and in accidents such as these, anything can occur —”

“No,” said Jaide. “You don’t understand. Grandma X is . . . is *special*.”

She couldn’t say what she really wanted to say. That Grandma X had magical Gifts, and wisdom, and . . .

There was the clatter of boots in the hall, and then all of a sudden, the twins’ mother was in the doorway. Mr. Carver stood up nervously, but she ignored him and dashed to the children.

“Jack, Jaide!”

The twins moved into Susan’s hug as if she was a life preserver thrown to them at sea. She hugged them just as tightly for a moment, then eased them back.

“Is . . . is she dead?” asked Jaide. She could hardly get the words out, or keep back the tears that were suddenly welling up in her eyes.

“No,” said Susan. “But the car was in the river for some time, and they’ve just got it out and she’s still inside. She *is* conscious, which is a very good sign. We’ll be flying her to the hospital as soon as they can . . . get her free. I just ran over to tell you that Rodeo Dave is on his way, and he’ll drive you to the hospital. I’ll be there, of course.”

“Which hospital?” asked Jack. He looked at Jaide, and she knew what he was thinking. Grandma X might have to be taken beyond the wards, and neither of them knew what effect that might have.

Grandma X was the Warden of Portland, charged with secretly protecting the world from The Evil, a terrible force from another dimension. If it hadn’t been for the Wardens, the world would have been taken over long ago. Jack and Jaide were going to be Wardens one day, but for now they were troubletwisters, young Wardens whose Gifts were unreliable and occasionally dangerous, despite the best efforts of their grandmother to teach them how to use them. The first time their Gifts had appeared, the twins had accidentally blown up their house in the city and they had been forced to move away from the life they had always known.

Their grandmother was strict and knew a lot more about everything than she ever let on, including her name. They just called her Grandma X while everyone else mumbled when they had to call her anything. The twins had been in Portland for months now, constantly learning about their Gifts and their new responsibilities, but sometimes it seemed as though they had barely begun. There was still so much they didn’t understand.

Would the four wards of Portland, which kept The Evil from breaking into the world, still work if the Warden in charge of them left?

What would happen if she died?

“She’ll go to Scarborough, of course,” said Susan, ignorant of their concerns. She didn’t like being reminded of the legacy the twins had inherited from their father, and Grandma X had “encouraged” her ability to forget. “Better facilities. Not to demean Portland Hospital, but —”

Her walkie-talkie crackled and a voice said, “Sue! Almost there. Three minutes.”

“On my way!” Susan replied. She hugged the twins again. “I have to go. She’ll be okay, I’m sure of it. She’s the toughest person I know!”

She turned quickly to Mr. Carver. “Dave Smeaton from the Book Herd is authorized to pick the children up. He’ll be here in a moment.”

With one last hug and one last look to the twins, she was gone.

The next five minutes were very long. Mr. Carver spun the prayer wheel one more time, then put it down and picked up his nose flute, but he put that down again without playing anything. He opened his mouth to say something, and nothing came out. Finally, he got up and slid through the door, pausing to mutter something about “leaving you to your thoughts” and “must get back to class.”

As soon as he was gone, Jack and Jaide started whispering furiously to each other.

“She’ll be okay,” said Jack. “She probably wasn’t even really hurt. Right?”

“But a *hospital*, Jack. What if they fly her to Scarborough? Shouldn’t we do something?”

“We should call Dad,” they said together.

“But we don’t know where he is,” Jack pointed out.

“Custer!” said Jaide, thinking of their father’s old friend. “Custer will know.”



“We don’t know how to get in touch with him, either. Or the other Wardens. Grandma X did all that.”

“Mom must have a number for Dad,” said Jaide, but she didn’t sound very convinced.

“He always loses his phone,” said Jack glumly. “And he’s usually somewhere weird anyway, where nothing works. But he might have, you know, secret Warden ways of knowing stuff. Maybe Grandma X sent him a . . . a thought message . . . or something.”

“I cannot reach your father,” said a faint voice behind the twins, apparently emanating from the wall. Jack and Jaide leaped off the couch as if it was suddenly red-hot.

Behind them, on the wall, was a faint image of their grandmother. She didn’t look young like she usually did when her spirit form appeared, and it didn’t look three-dimensional. This was more like a blurry photo being projected onto the wallpaper. Her white hair was even messier than it was every morning. Her eyelids fluttered.

“I am somewhat injured,” said Grandma X. “But I will be all right, so you don’t need to worry.”

“But they’re taking you to Scarborough!” exclaimed Jaide. “What will that do to the wards?”

“They are *not* taking me to Scarborough,” said the blurry image with familiar stubbornness. “Shortly, they will decide that it is better to take me somewhere closer, even if the facilities are not so advanced. Portland Hospital will fit the bill perfectly.”

Her eyelids closed completely, but not before the twins saw her eyes roll back upward, into her head.

“Are you really okay?” asked Jack anxiously.

“I have a concussion . . . and my body was affected by the cold of the river,” said Grandma X, her eyes opening again.

“I don’t have much time. Custer will monitor the wards. I

don't expect trouble, but if anything does come up, and Custer is not available, you can . . . ow! . . . be careful —”

Grandma X's voice was cut off, and the image disappeared.

“Hello, you two,” said Rodeo Dave from the doorway behind them. The twins spun around again, uncertain how long he'd been there. He bobbed his head and said, “All ready to go? Scarborough Hospital, your mother said.”

“Uh, yeah, thanks,” said Jack. “Only maybe, we should check first —”

Dave's phone rang.

“Hang on, Jack. Dave here . . . oh, right . . . no problem. We're on our way.”

He put the phone away and said to the twins, “Not Scarborough General. Portland Hospital. We'll be there in a jiffy. Come on!”

The helicopter lifted off as they got to Dave's white van, which he used to pick up and deliver books. They all piled in the front and, after reminding Dave about his seat belt, they drove out onto River Road.

“We'll have to go the long way,” said Dave. “The bridge will be closed for a while.”

The twins peered past the willows to the bridge, which was surrounded by emergency vehicles. At the southern end, the crane truck that usually worked at the marina was up on its supports, with a chain going down to the battered, mud-strewn wreck of a yellow Hillman Minx that had been pulled out of the river.

Seeing the car made it all seem more horribly real. Jack had to look away, and Jaide found herself the victim of a sudden attack of the shivers.

“Your grandmother will be fine,” said Dave, noting both of these events. He leaned across and opened the glove compartment. “Grab a couple of the sweets, there. You’ve both had a nasty shock.”

The sweets were nothing the twins had ever seen before, old-fashioned boiled things wrapped in paper that was hard to remove. Concentrating on getting the paper off took up most of the trip to the hospital.

Susan was waiting for them in the lobby.

“Grandma is okay,” she said. “We were worried for a moment, but she rallied as soon as we got her here. That’s amazing for someone who’s been through a major accident.”

“Can we see her?” asked Jaide, as Jack said, “Is she awake?”

“The doctors are with her now,” said Susan. “They’re going to keep her in Critical Care until tomorrow morning, probably. They may still have to move her to Scarborough. As for what happened . . . it’s not that clear. She told Officer Haigh a truck or a van came up fast behind her, tried to overtake her before the bridge, and then cut back in unexpectedly, forcing her off the road and into the river.”

“And the truck didn’t stop?” asked Jack. “Wow, that’s mean.”

“More than mean,” said Susan. “It’s criminal. The police will be looking for it. But don’t worry about that. I’m going to need your help. Things are going to be a bit complicated at home for a while. I can’t get someone to cover me immediately — you know how we’re always short-handed, so you’ll be by yourselves a bit more than usual. I will be home tonight, though. Maybe we can find someone to check in on you until my shift is over.”

“What about Tara?” asked Jaide. “We could hang out with her.”

“Yes, good idea. I’ll give her father a call . . . but we can’t rely on them every night.”

Rodeo Dave, who had until that moment been occupied with grooming his thick mustache, cleared his throat.

“Renita Daniels — that is, Rennie — has been helping me out at the shop,” he said. “I’ve let her have the small apartment up top, and I’m sure she’d be happy to . . . uh . . . babysit, if you pardon the term, Jaide, Jack. . . .”

Susan nodded with relief. “Thank you, Dave. And thanks for bringing the twins here. Can I ask you to take them back to school as well? I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not.” He winked at them. “It’s a pleasure.”

“Oh, and I should have said before how sorry I was to hear about Young Master Rourke. He was a friend of yours, wasn’t he?”

“He was,” said Dave, his face falling. “He bought a lot of books from me over the years. In fact, I’m heading up there the day after tomorrow, to catalog his collection for the executors.”

“Young Master who?” asked Jack.

“What happened to him?” added Jaide.

“We’ll talk about it later,” said Susan. “Now, remember, Grandma X is very fit and strong . . . for someone her age. So don’t worry . . . honest —”

She was interrupted by three quick bursts of sound from her walkie-talkie. Not words, just the crackle.

“Got to go! Love you!”

There was a whirlwind embrace, then she was off.

“Okay,” said Dave. His smile returned as though it had never vanished. “Your chariot awaits.”

## CHAPTER TWO

# AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

Four hours later, water was dripping from the edge of the umbrella Jack Shield held and trickling right down the back of his sister's neck. Jaide shuddered and tugged her collar tight up to her throat, pulling her head in as best she could. She could see nothing outside the umbrella but sods of disturbed earth, the mud-spattered feet of the adults walking around them, and the base of a heavy, gray stone wall three yards away. The rain continued to stream down on them, far heavier than it had been back in the town.

"Remind me what we're doing here?" she grumbled.

"You suggested it," said Jack. "You asked Mom if we could hang out with Tara."

"But this wasn't what I was expecting!"

They were standing next to a life-size castle — a real one, to all appearances, with turrets and a portcullis, even a deep moat filled with murky brown water. Nearby were a number of smaller buildings scattered on the edge of a large and even murkier lake. A squat pyramid peeked around the shoulder of a low hill.

"Dad says this is one of the most important landmarks in Portland," Tara said, coming up behind them. She had her own umbrella, a purple-spotted thing that looked brand-new, vastly different to the moth-eaten black antique the twins had found in the back of Tara's car. It leaked and

two people couldn't quite fit under it, but Jaide told herself it was better than nothing. "He knew you'd love to see it since you're interested in old buildings and stuff."

"Er, right."

It was Jaide's turn to want to kick her brother, this time for the ridiculous lie he had come up with to explain their former interest in Tara's father, a property developer. It meant long lectures on the renovation potential of old warehouses and barracks and being dragged about in all manner of weather, whether they asked to go or not.

"You know, Jaide, it *is* pretty cool," said Jack, peering out and up at the castle wall, tipping the umbrella in the process and sending another wave of water straight into Jaide's right ear. "There was nothing like this in the city."

Jaide braved the rain to take another look. The side of the castle seemed to go up forever, broken every now and again only by a narrow, slitlike window, for archers to fire from. Jaide didn't think there had ever been a need for archers in Portland, but there probably hadn't been any need for a moat, either.

"Young Master Rourke lived here?" she asked.

"Not here exactly. He was in that little building we passed, by the gates."

"And he really just died?" Jack asked, thinking of the sadness in Rodeo Dave's eyes and the weirdness of their present position. They had only just heard about him, and now here they were, exploring where he had used to live.

"Saturday night," Tara said. Her eyes gleamed with gruesome relish. "Dad doesn't know who found him."

"Maybe his butler," said Jaide.

"He didn't have a butler. He cooked and cleaned for himself, and lived here completely alone."

Jack peered curiously around, at the little they could see through the sheets of heavy rain. He could make out people striding about in boots and raincoats, some of them holding nets and odd mechanical lassoes.

“I can’t believe Portland has a *castle*,” he said, wondering if it was cool for a grown-up to want to live in one, or a bit weird. He had thought Grandma X was the strangest person in Portland, but now it seemed she had some competition.

*Used to have competition*, he reminded himself. That thought, combined with the thought of her all alone in the hospital, made him worry about her even more.

“I can’t believe Portland has a castle, either,” exclaimed Tara’s dad, sticking his head into their huddle of umbrellas with a wide, white-toothed smile. He was, as always, wearing a cap with the name of his company on it, MMM Holdings. “And it’s prime real estate, just perfect for redevelopment. When the will is sorted out, we could be sitting on a gold mine! Do you know, the main building has thirty-seven bedrooms and hasn’t been lived in for twenty years? Think how many apartments we could fit in there!”

“Dad!” protested Tara. “The old guy only just died! And you’re already moving in on the property?”

“Officially, the council asked for a valuation, in case Rourke left it to the state,” he said, ruffling her black hair before she could flinch away. “But it doesn’t hurt to speculate. I mean, imagine the possibilities. There’s a lot of work to be done. We’d have to get that bridge fixed, first of all. . . .”

He hurried off to oversee four council workers who were trying to shift a footbridge that had fallen into the

stream that fed the castle's moat. A sheet of water was building up behind it and spreading like a gleaming, translucent pancake across the muddy lawn. Everyone's footprints were being submerged, human and animal alike. On the far side of the lake, two more council workers were struggling to catch something that looked very much like a zebra.

"Do you think he had a pet platypus?" Tara asked. "I've always wanted to see one of those."

"Really?" said Jack. "They'd creep me out, I reckon."

"Why?"

"Well, it's like they're made from bits of lots of animals, all mixed together."

"Like Frankenstein's monster?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Tara was quiet for a moment, then she said in a distant voice, "I had a dream like that . . . I think. There was a monster . . . or something . . . made of lots of smaller things. You were in the dream, Jack. And you, too, Jaide. But I can't quite remember it."

Jaide sought some way to change the subject. Tara wasn't remembering a dream, but something that had really happened to all of them. Four weeks ago, they had been attacked by The Evil, which had a nasty habit of taking over living things and mixing them together, creating very real monsters that could in turn attack people. After The Evil had been vanquished, one of Grandma X's fellow Wardens, a big-haired man named Aleksandr, had used his Gift to cloud Tara's memory of everything that had happened to her. Sometimes the memory poked up again, though, before returning to the depths. What would happen if it ever came right out, Jaide didn't like to imagine.



“Look down there,” Jack said. “Are they statues down by the creek? Let’s check them out.”

Tara shook herself, sending droplets of water tumbling down her green overcoat. “They don’t look like anything special.”

“Come on,” said Jaide, relieved to hear Tara’s voice returning to normal. “We’re going to get washed away if we stay here.”

The pool of water was spreading rapidly toward them, backed up from where the bridge had fallen into the creek. Tara’s dad was waving his arms imperiously, to the annoyance of all, and the sound of raised voices was getting steadily louder as the problem showed no sign of being fixed.

Jack, Jaide, and Tara gave the puddle a wide berth and headed past the impromptu dam to where a much-reduced trickle ran along the slimy creek bed. The ground was slippery underfoot and the rain showed no sign of letting up.

It was weird, Jack thought, how Portland had been sunny when they had set out after school. The clouds had only gathered when they’d reached the estate. And it was odder still how it seemed to be raining *only* on the estate, not anywhere else. It was so heavy and set in. . . .

“There you go!” Tara called back to them from the line of statues. “Men in sheets and women without any arms. What’s with these old guys? Don’t they have any taste?”

Jack opened his mouth to say that being rich meant you didn’t have to have any taste, but Jaide pulled him to a sudden halt.

“Look,” she whispered, pointing into an untidy copse at the far edge of the estate. “There’s someone in those trees, waving at us.”

“Where?”

“There!”

Jack peered into the shadows under the trees, using his Gift to see details Jaide could only guess at. His Gift was strongest at night, but the sun was so hidden right now behind heavy rain clouds that his sight was clear. There *was* someone in the copse, a lone man in a coat and hat, his eyes invisible behind dark glasses. It was hard to make out more than that, but he was definitely staring right at Jack and his sister, and his right hand was above his head, waving back and forth.

“That looks like Dad,” said Jaide.

Jack squinted. “It couldn’t be him, could it? He isn’t supposed to come anywhere near us.”

“What if he’s here because of Grandma’s accident?”

Jack raised a hand, tentatively, and waved back.

The shadowy figure raised both hands in a triumphant thumbs-up.

“It *is* Dad!” exclaimed Jaide.

The twins hadn’t been this close to their father since their Gifts had woken, apart from once, when the protection supplied by the four wards of Portland had broken. He wasn’t allowed to be near them because it made their Gifts go crazy.

There was, however, no denying the relief they felt upon seeing him. Someone must have told him about what had happened, and perhaps he had come back to check on them from a distance.

Jaide waved, too, and suddenly, with long energetic strides, their father moved toward them, stepping out from under the trees and across the sodden lawn. Jack and Jaide were torn between being pleased to see him and freaking out.

“What’s he *doing* here?” hissed Jaide. “If someone sees . . .”

Jack looked frantically around. Tara was busy poking her finger into the eye socket of a statue. The council workers were hard at work shifting the bridge and chasing the escaped animals — but all it would take was one of them to look around and recognize their father.

“We need a distraction!” Jaide said. Their father had already crossed half the distance between them.

Jack thought fast.

“Use your Gift,” he said, glancing up at the clouds. Jaide’s Gift was mostly tied to the sun. “It should be kind of damped down right now. I’ll go talk to him while you keep everyone busy — just keep your distance while you’re doing it.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” said Jaide. “Besides, I want to talk to him, too!”

“Can you think of anything else?”

“Not right away —”

“There’s no time. Just do it!”

“All right, all right!” said Jaide, giving him the umbrella. “I’ll do my best — but don’t use your Gift when you’re near him. Who knows what might happen?”

Jack could easily imagine. When he could control it properly, his Gift gave him power over light and shade, allowing him to shadow-walk, among other useful skills. When he couldn’t control it, it had the power to black out the sun.

“Be careful,” he said to Jaide.

“I will. You, too.”

Jack hurried toward the bank of the creek, practically vanishing into the thick, gray sheets of rain.

Jaide shielded her eyes with her hand and turned to look up the slight rise past the dammed creek to the castle, where Tara's dad was still arguing with the council workers.

"A distraction," she whispered to herself.

She felt for her Gift, and embraced the slight breeze, collecting it around her, building it up so that she could use it. A gust escaped her hold for a moment, pirouetting around her like an invisible dancer, sending her damp hair flying.

"That's right," she whispered, gesturing with her free hand to usher the wind away from her. Strands of wet red hair lashed her face, but she ignored them. "You can do it."

The gust grew stronger, whisked twice more around her, then shot off up the slope, where it capered around the arguing men, snatching up Tara's dad's hat. He clutched at it and missed, knocking the man closest to him onto his backside. The hat smacked the face of a third man, and everything dissolved into chaos.

Jack heard sudden shouts behind him, but he didn't turn around to see. His attention was fixed on his father, who was approaching rapidly across the muddy field. The rain seemed to fall even more heavily around him, so much so that it came down in visible sheets, beating on the umbrella so hard it sounded as if it might collapse under the impact.

Hector Shield raised his hat and waved it in one hand. He shouted something that Jack couldn't make out. They were close enough now that Jack could clearly see locks of curly brown hair plastered to his father's high forehead, so like Jack's own. His glasses were completely smeared with rain. Even with the characteristic welcoming smile on his face, he looked strained and worried.

“It’s not deep!” Jack called out, as Hector suddenly stopped on the other side of the creek.

Hector didn’t move. He had stopped as suddenly as if he’d run into a wall, and now he backed up a few feet, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his sleeve. He squinted at Jack with eyes that were a perfect match for his son’s, apart from being desperately myopic.

“It’s not deep!” Jack shouted again. “Come over!” The rain was so loud now it drowned his words. He could hardly hear himself.

All of a sudden, one side of his umbrella collapsed, and a great deluge washed down Jack’s back. He cried out and threw the umbrella down in disgust.

His father shouted something in return, but Jack couldn’t hear him. The rain was amazingly loud. Jack pointed at his ears, then at the sky, and shrugged.

Hector Shield nodded, and pointed urgently at something behind Jack, stabbing the air with his finger.

Jack whipped around, squinting against the rain. Even through the downpour he could see what his father was pointing at so emphatically.

A thick, black twister was rising up over the castle like a supernatural cobra gathering its strength to strike.

A tornado.

Jaide’s Gift had gone out of control.

“No, no,” she hissed into the wind. She’d forgotten about trying to be unobtrusive, and was making wild hauling-in motions with her hands. “That’s way too much!”

The twister didn’t listen to her. It sucked in the rain and blew it out sideways like a fire hose, knocking a council worker upside down and sending him sliding across the mud with the speed of an ice hockey puck. Then it swooped

down and picked up the bridge, raising it high up above the heads of the cowering workers.

“No!” shrieked Jaide. “*Listen* to me! Obey me!”

The twister slowed and bent forward, toward Jaide, the bridge still spinning thirty feet up in the air. The huddle of council workers suddenly split, everyone running in different directions.

Jaide felt the tension in the tornado, the built-up energy that just had to go somewhere. It needed to do *something*.

“All right,” said Jaide sternly. “Just don’t hurt anyone, and then you really have to go back to normal.”

The tornado spun faster still, crouched down like a discus thrower about to throw, and then the bridge suddenly flew out of it, sailing across the field and smashing into the distant pyramid, broken pieces of timber sliding down the reinforced concrete slope.

Downstream, Jack watched openmouthed as the twister reared up even higher, got thinner, and then winked out of existence.

He had to shut his mouth as he suffered a massive rain-drop straight down his throat. Coughing, he turned back toward his father, shrouded in rain on the other side of the creek. The water level had suddenly risen now that the fallen bridge was no longer blocking the creek upstream, so there was no chance for either of them to get across.

“Jack! Mmmm the mmmmm.”

“What?” shouted Jack, as loudly as he could.

“Catch — the — phone!”

The twins’ father pulled back his left arm and threw something small and black high across the creek bed. Jack stepped back, stretched, and caught the object. In the next instant his feet slid in the mud and he went over backward, landing with a jarring thud.

“Ow,” said Jack. “Major ow.”

He looked at the cell phone clutched tightly in his hand. It was in a plastic bag, with a charger. The screen was lit up, showing a message.

*I heard about Grandma. Will call you later. Don't tell your mother I was here!*

Jack looked across the stream. His father was backing away, disappearing into the darkness of the torrential rain.

“Wait! Don't go!”

A hand tugged at his shoulder.

“Jack? Are you all right? Did the tornado get you?”

It was Tara.

“Yeah, no, I just slipped.”

“Well, come *on*. Don't just stand there! You'll drown.”

The creek was rising with incredible speed. The rain was phenomenal — it had to be some kind of cloudburst. Jack staggered to his feet, slipping the phone and charger into his pocket as Tara helped him up. She tried to hold her umbrella over him, but one last, errant remnant of the twister blew past, smashing the umbrella's ribs and turning it inside out.

“Oh no!” exclaimed Tara. “That was Mom's! This weather is *crazy!*”

“You can say that again,” said Jaide, who had just run up. She looked apologetically at Jack, but there wasn't time to say anything more before Tara's father bore down on them.

“Are you all right?”

He pulled Tara into a hug. Tara's dad had been much more protective of her since The Evil's last attack, when she'd been caught up in the train wreck. Tara had told the twins she both liked and disliked this new attention. This time, she let him keep his arm around her.

“Do you three want to go home?” he asked. “I can come back later by myself. You’re soaked, and this rain, this amazing wind . . .”

“I think it’s easing,” said Tara. “I’m not cold. And I don’t mind being soaked. I want to see the rest of the estate.”

The rain *was* easing, at least near the castle. Farther off, toward the woods where the twins’ father had gone, it was still bucketing down.

“What about you two?”

“We’re fine,” said Jaide. “Lead on, Lin!”

She fell back a few paces as they headed for the pyramid.

“Did you speak to Dad?” she whispered to her brother. “What did he say?”

Jack retrieved the message and held the phone out to her, keeping it cradled in his palm.

Jaide stared at it, her pale brow creased, the rain trickling down her face like tears.

“Is that all?”

“He didn’t have time for more. Someone might have seen him.”

“But still —”

“We can ask him when he calls us. Besides, look, Jaide — he gave us a *phone*.”

The upside of their brief encounter with their father only occurred to her then. The twins had been hankering for a cell phone for months, but neither their mother nor their grandmother had given in. It was hard to play them off against each other when they agreed so absolutely, if only on that single point. But now their father had given them one, and they hadn’t even had to ask!



Despite the circumstances, it was a welcome development.

“Let’s call him,” Jaide said.

“The number he texted us from is blocked. . . .”

Tara glanced over her shoulder to hurry them up, and Jack hastily put the phone away again. Whatever their father had to say to them would have to wait a little while longer.