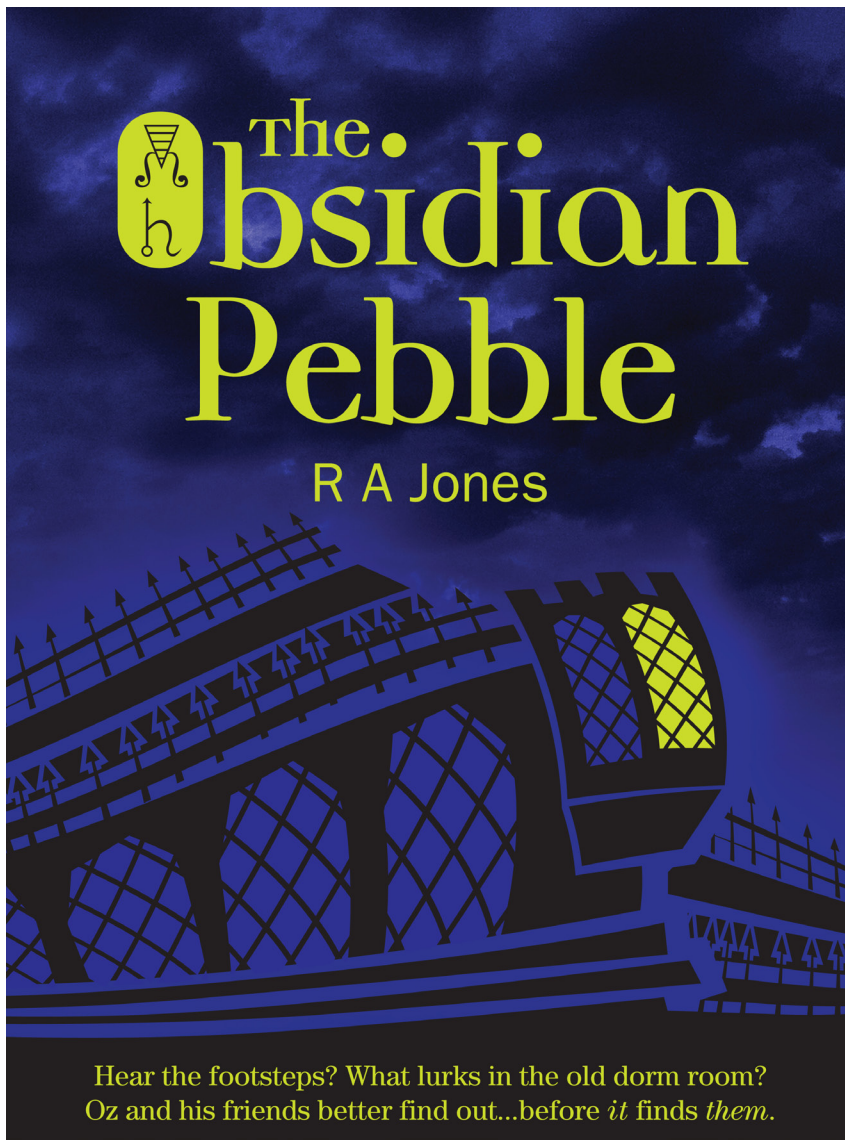




The Obsidian Pebble

R A Jones

Hear the footsteps? What lurks in the old dorm room?
Oz and his friends better find out...before *it* finds *them*.

EXCERPT FROM:

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First Book of the Artefact Series
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Published by
Lucky Bat Books
LuckyBatBooks.com

Nisi credideritis, non intelligetis

Unless you will have believed, you will not understand.

(St. Augustine)

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Chapter 1

The Halloween Feast

Oz Chambers sat in his bedroom, desperately trying to drag his thoughts back to algebra and ignore the tempting bottle of blood on his desk. He made himself look away from the crimson phial and struggled with two maths questions, before trying to get to grips with the essay on “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” he’d been dabbling with all week. He liked English and especially reading, but that didn’t make the essay any easier.

Oz sighed heavily. It was no good. Today was proving to be a particularly hopeless homework day because he just couldn’t settle. He was simply too excited by the prospect of what was in store that evening. So instead of writing about chivalry and other knightly stuff, he found himself wondering what it would have been like to go to Cornwall with Ruff, or to Centre Parks with Ellie. Maybe, unlike him, they’d had a rip-roaring half term of thrills and spills.

Yeah, right.

He smiled at the thought of what they’d have to say if he confessed to feeling hard done by, shaking his head as he imagined their expressions. Ellie Messenger was Oz’s oldest friend. But unlike Oz, who was an only child, she was always complaining that she never had any time to herself, being the middle one of

five. Ruff too had an older brother called Gareth (Gassy Gazer) who was always hogging the Xbox, much to Ruff's disgust. Given the choice, Ruff and Ellie would much rather have spent half-term week at Penwurt with Oz. They would have thought him completely mad to want to be anywhere else.

Not that it mattered anymore because today was Saturday and they were both back from their family breaks and due over at Oz's in just a few hours' time. He felt a thrill of eager anticipation course through him. The three of them were going to be spending the whole night together on this, the last Saturday of half term. But today was not just the last weekend of the holidays, it was also the thirty-first of October and he, Ellie and Ruff had big plans for Halloween. After all, he did happen to live in the oldest house in Seabourne and rumour had it that it was well and truly haunted.

Oz opened a window, sniffed the damp autumn air and felt a goose-pimplly tingle flow through him. He smiled. On a day like this and in a house like Penwurt, absolutely anything could happen.

A quarter of an hour later Oz gave up completely on the essay, grabbed the bloody phial off the desk and went to the bathroom. He had a quick shower, towelled himself dry and positioned himself in front of the steamy bathroom mirror. His uncombed dark hair lay flat and damp on his head and his pale blue eyes narrowed in concentration as he opened the phial and tipped it gingerly towards his lips, letting a few droplets trickle under the corner of his mouth. The blood looked thin and watery and altogether not worth the money he'd paid for it. He wiped it off in disgust and opted instead for a scar under his left eye, stuck a yellow-headed boil on the side of his nose for luck and went back to his bedroom. He dressed, tidied away his schoolbooks and then went downstairs and tried to watch some TV. By the time

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Ruff finally pitched up, complete with paint-flecked hair and a battered backpack, it was late afternoon.

“Good week?” Oz asked as Ruff threw himself down on the bed in the spare room.

“Terrific,” Ruff said in a flat tone that implied it had been anything but. As usual, a curtain of curly brown hair hung in spirals in front of Ruff’s long face and partly hid a strong nose, which was, at this moment, wrinkling in disgust. “Wasn’t much of a holiday to be honest. Dad got the job of painting the chalets at this place on the edge of a moor and it was fuh-freezing. Bet you didn’t know Cornwall was in the Arctic Circle, did you?”

“It isn’t,” Oz said.

“Felt like it. It was buzzard cold, I tell you.”

Oz grinned. Ruff was the only person he knew that used the same word to describe something as brilliant or awful. In fact, Ruff used “buzzard” to describe just about everything.

“Mum’s gone bananas over the food as usual,” Oz explained as they shared a piece of the chocolate Ruff had brought for emergencies. “She’s made mini pizzas in the shape of witch’s hats, freaky finger biscuits with almonds for nails and strawberry jam filling so they look like they’ve been chopped off at the knuckle, and Dracula knows what else. I think she’s looking forward to it more than I am.”

“Buzzard,” Ruff said, grinning and showing Oz his chocolate-covered teeth.

“By the way, you haven’t said anything about my massive boil.” Oz stuck his nose out at Ruff.

“Can’t see anything different,” Ruff said, and ducked as an Oz-launched cushion sailed just past his left ear.

When they went down to the kitchen at six to announce that they were going out to watch the little kids trick-or-treating,

the table was already laden with platters covered by a motley selection of tea towels.

“Oz, is that you?” A disembodied voice floated out from a mudroom off the kitchen, followed a moment later by a slightly flushed face. Gwen Chambers was the prettiest woman Oz knew, even if he was very biased, and even if there were a few more lines around her eyes than there used to be. Sometimes there’d be dark smudges there as well. But even though Oz noticed, no one else seemed to and they were appearing much less often these days. A stray blond wisp had escaped the scrunch that was holding her hair away from her face. It hung fetchingly over one eye and she blew it away with the corner of her mouth and smiled.

“Mum, who is going to eat all this stuff?” Oz asked, laughing.

“Oh, it’ll get used up, you’ll see,” Mrs Chambers said. “I’ve seen Ruff eat, don’t forget.” And then she added in a voice just loud enough to be heard, “And that’s a sight one does not forget very easily.”

“Mu-um,” Oz chided her.

“Just a little joke.” She beamed at Ruff. “Let’s just say that I’ll be surprised if there’s a lot left over by this time tomorrow.” She fetched a spoon and started stirring a pot on the stove.

They left her to it and went outside to check out the trick-or-treaters. They played spot the vampire but gave up after counting twenty in three minutes. There was a mixture of monsters and ghouls, a couple of Frankensteins, three Spider-men and a whole coven of witches. They saw only one house that had been egged and floured and passed two with signs on the gates that said, “No Trick or Treating here. Gone OUT.” But after half an hour of being pestered by three-foot-high Draculas they got fed up and went back to Oz’s place to wait for Ellie. As they stood waiting to cross the street, Ruff looked up at Oz’s house and cooed admiringly.

“I’ve got to say it, your place is buzzard wicked, Oz.”

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Oz followed his gaze and had to agree. Much bigger than the Chambers either needed or could really afford, it was like something out of a medieval story book with its high turrets jutting out of the walls on all four corners. His dad had called these turrets bartizans, but despite their weird name Oz thought they were brilliant; it made it look like there might be archers up there on watch, guarding the place from attack.

Oz even liked its colour; red, brown and yellow sandstone blocks, some stained dark from years of car fumes and dirt, others – sheltered from the elements – a deep russet, or a mellow ochre. A low stone wall topped by black wrought-iron fencing marked the border between the house and the pavement. It added to the feeling Oz quite often had that somehow Penwurt was a fortification: a place where, once inside, you were shielded from the outside world and all its dangers. An iron gate led to a path that crossed the drive to a huge oak-studded front door. This was set back between two forward-jutting wings in which five large mullioned windows faced the street. Behind the U-shaped front was the oldest part of the house; a long, three-story block with crenellated parapets, three tall spindly chimneys and high windows. A tarmac drive ran up one side, whilst the other hid a slightly overgrown, but quite secluded, walled garden.

His dad had talked of plans to renovate the old block and maybe let it as flats, but those plans had long been shelved. Instead, his mother double-locked the inside doors to the old part of the house and checked them every night, both downstairs and up. She made a point of never going through those doors if she could help it because, unlike Oz's dad for whom the oldest part was a treasure trove of secrets and delights, all it did for his mother was give her the heebie-jeebies. And although post would get to it if the letters had a simple "No 2 Magnus Street"

on the envelope, everyone knew the old property by the name written in black iron letters over the front door: Penwurt.

“Yeah,” Oz said, smiling in reply to Ruff’s statement. “It is buzzard wicked, isn’t it.”

Ellie finally arrived at eight and, as soon as she had dumped her stuff in a room next to Mrs Chambers’, announced that she was “well starving.” In the kitchen, there seemed to be even more food than two hours before.

“I thought you should have the pumpkin soup here since it’s hot,” Mrs Chambers said. “Then you can take the rest through.”

“Thanks, Mum,” Oz said as his mother ladled out the steaming broth. He watched her fussing and smiled. She was almost back to her normal, over-the-top self and he wasn’t going to complain about that.

“This is amazing,” Ellie said, shutting her eyes ecstatically and breathing in the aroma.

“Buzzard,” was Ruff’s contribution, but it emerged through a mouthful of crusty bread and came out as “buhdduh,” which made Ellie start to giggle.

“You know that any time you’ve had enough tonight just call me and I’ll come and get you,” Mrs Chambers said with feeling as she cut more bread.

“Mum, we’re going to be twenty yards away.” Oz had been through all this with her a hundred times. It had taken ages to convince her to let them stay the night in the old block and now was not the time for her to start having cold feet.

“I know that, but all I’m saying is...”

“We’ll be fine.”

“Oh-kay,” Mrs Chambers said, making her eyes wide in an I’ve-got-the-message kind of way and starting to pull the tea

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towels off the things she'd made. The reveal immediately triggered a series of astonished oohs and aahs from everyone.

"Is that really brain pâté?" asked Ellie, goggling at a pink mass which looked exactly like it had just come out of someone's skull. Her honey-coloured hair was tied back and her large deep blue eyes were currently twice as big as usual from staring at the food.

"Cream cheese, mushroom soup and prawns. Bit garish looking but it tastes fantastic, even if I say so myself," Mrs Chambers explained.

Ruff pointed to a tray covered in golf ball-sized objects. "And are those..."

"Marshmallow eyeballs." Mrs Chambers nodded and popped one into her mouth. "Delicious."

Ruff grinned and popped one in himself. Oz watched his face dissolve in rapture.

"Mmmm, see just what you mean."

"That's awful," Ellie said, groaning.

"Eyeful, more like," Oz said, pushing away his empty soup bowl. "Come on, grab a sleeping bag and let's go through."

Oz went to a door to the left of the stone stairwell that was usually kept locked.

But not tonight.

They crossed a passageway to another door, which opened out into a large, shabby-looking entrance hall with a massive double staircase leading up to the floor above. The place smelled musty and unused and their voices echoed into the chilly emptiness when they spoke.

"This atrium used to be the orphanage dining room," Oz announced.

"Is this where we're having the feast?" Ellie asked, sounding impressed.

“No. I thought we’d use the old dorm. It’s really spooky in there.”

“I’ve always wanted to spend a Halloween night in a real haunted house,” Ruff said, rubbing his hands together. “It’s going to be so buzzard.”

“Don’t build your hopes up,” Ellie said. “Nine times out of ten these things end up being rubbish.”

“Nothing like a bit of enthusiasm, is there,” Ruff tutted. “And anyway, the place is a legend. It was even in *Hidden Haunted Houses of Great Britain*.

“I didn’t know that,” Oz said.

“Ye-ah, it was in the reference section in Waterstone’s the other day. It said something like...an old orphanage on Magnus Street in Seabourne now occupies the site of the Bunthorpe Encounter. One of the most famous supernatural occurrences in the country.”

“Cool,” Oz said, sounding pleased. “I’ll google it later.”

“Looks more real in a book though somehow, don’t you think?” Ellie said.

Oz knew what she meant. He made a mental note to look it up next time he was in the bookshop. They walked up the stairs and passed a peculiar-looking wrought-iron chandelier with a huge bird of prey with its wings unfurled at its centre.

“That is so weirdly mingin,” Ruff said. He kept glancing at it uneasily as he climbed and Oz resisted the urge to say “buzzard” with the utmost of difficulty.

On the first floor, the doors had all been boarded up except for one, which, though not boarded, was padlocked. Oz took them up one more flight to the second floor, where another stairway ran up to their left to another door.

“Where does that go?” asked Ellie.

“Firescape,” Oz explained. “Quickest way down.”

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“Worth knowing for when the mad axe-man calls,” she said with a furtive look at Ruff, who had glanced nervously behind him on hearing the words “axe-man.”

Oz walked forward a few steps along the landing and stopped before a huge oak door. He pushed it open and, as if on queue, it creaked magnificently. They stepped across the threshold into a large, dark space. Ruff tried the wall switch but nothing happened. The only light came from thin beams of moonlight slanting through the windows on the eastern wall. Oz flicked on his torch and made his way to the centre of the dorm. He pushed a couple of plugs into extension leads and instantly the lamps he'd arranged lit up the dormitory. What was revealed was a room that spanned the length of the building. Yards of oak paneling lined the walls upon which hung a variety of old paintings and photos. Long dusty strings of cobweb wafted in the draughty corners, adding nicely to the room's eerie air of abandonment.

“Take a look at this, “ Ellie called to the other two as she peered at one of the photos. The boys joined her and stared at a faded black and white print of the very room they were standing in, but lined with twenty-two beds just like an old hospital ward. “Must be what the dorm was like.”

“Wow,” Ruff said. “Not exactly private, was it?”

In the centre, near the lamps, Oz had laid out three folding chairs and two foldaway tables, one bearing a flat-screen monitor and his Xbox.

“There's a toilet block at the far end,” Oz explained. “The lights do work in there, just in case you were wondering.”

Ruff stood surveying his surroundings open-mouthed. “This is absolutely buzzard,” he said, grinning.

“What films have you got?” Ellie asked.

“*Fangman* and *Revenge of Fangman*,” Oz said,

“I brought *Toy Story*.”

“*Toy Story*?” Oz laughed.

“Just in case we need cheering up,” Ellie explained. “You know how nervy Ruff gets.”

“Hang on, I thought you were the one that said that Halloween was a load of cobblers.” Oz grinned.

“Yeah, but I suppose if anything could happen on Halloween it’d happen in a place like this, wouldn’t it?”

“Hey, look at the ceiling.” Ruff craned his neck upwards and Ellie followed suit.

Richly decorated wooden beams ran from east to west, red, green and blue chevrons adorning their sides. Between, on the plaster ceiling itself, detailed paintings of birds and weird-looking buildings and symbols filled the space. The effect was striking and original.

“Yeah, downstairs is like that too,” Oz explained in a matter-of-fact way. “It’s the sixteenth-century equivalent of wallpaper, or so my dad told me.”

“It’s so cool,” Ellie said. “And to think it’s lasted all that time.”

Oz nodded. He’d hoped they’d like the place, but to see them both so impressed had made his day. “Come on, let’s get the food up here.”

With the heaters on it was quite cozy within their little den. They sprayed on a few more boils and let fake blood drip off their stuck-on scars, but soon Ruff had *Fangman* up on the screen and they began tucking in to Mrs Chambers’ brilliant food. Ellie enjoyed dipping spoon-shaped bits of bread into the brain pâté more than anything else, while Oz had at least half a dozen freaky fingers. Mrs Chambers had deliberately put some marzipan in their middles because she knew Oz couldn’t resist it. All in all it was a brilliant night. Ellie had them in stitches as she explained how she’d accidentally broken the nose of her kickboxing teacher the week before because he’d sneezed just as she was practising

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a head kick. Ruff, meanwhile, obviously deeply scarred by spending a week outdoors helping his dad paint the chalets, kept on about how cold he'd been.

"I swear I saw a penguin on the lake and one morning there was this humongous dollop next to the perimeter fence which looked moistly fresh. I think it definitely must have been polar bear poo and not anything to do with the caretaker's Alsatian like my dad said it was."

"Ugghh," Ellie said, and quickly put down the freaky fig roll she was about to bite into.

Oz didn't respond because he was laughing so much. He'd known Ellie since the age of four. They'd attended the same playgroup and were in the same class at Hurley Street Junior School. Gwen and Ellie's mum, Fay, were friends, so Oz and Ellie had virtually grown up together. He knew he could trust her with just about anything. Funnily enough, despite only knowing Ruff for the seven weeks he'd been at Seabourne County School, Oz felt much the same way about him and knew Ellie did too. And on this Halloween night, he couldn't think of anywhere else he'd rather be, nor anyone else he'd rather be with.

They'd all seen *Fangman* half a dozen times, yet when the ghoul crept in to the bedroom to steal the hero's little sister, Oz thought he saw Ellie inch her chair a little closer to Ruff's. *Fangman Two* was almost as good and they munched on fried spiders – which were really splayed-out bits of crispy bacon – and slurped on marshmallow eyeballs until the DVD finally came to an end.

"What time is it?" said Ellie, stifling a yawn as the credits rolled on the second film.

"Fifteen minutes to the witching hour," Ruff said.

"And what's supposed to happen then?"

"Dunno, but that's when it all happens in the films, isn't it?"

"My mum says that the real witching hour is half past three in the morning," Ellie said knowingly.

"Buzzard," Ruff retorted, "you'd think they'd all be asleep by then."

"Tell you what," Oz suggested, "why don't we turn all the lights off and just sit by the windows. See if we can see anything outside in the moonlight."

"Yeah," Ruff agreed, hopping uncomfortably. "But first I need the loo. Oh, and we're out of Coke, by the way."

"Oh, no," Oz groaned. "I left the other bottle in the fridge."

Ruff and Ellie looked at him, grinning expectantly as he hurried out and down the atrium stairs, muttering to himself as he went.

"And while you're at it, get *Revenge of the Gargoyle Ghoul*. I left it in your bedroom," Ruff yelled after him.

Mrs Chambers had left the kitchen lights on and Oz ran quietly upstairs to his bedroom to fetch the DVD. Ruff's room was next to his, but on the other side was the locked door to his dad's study. Oz glanced at it wistfully. It had been like that for over two years now. Ever since his dad had died. One day, when his mother felt strong enough to open it up, he would explore that room and examine all the weird and wonderful things his dad had brought back from his travels. One day.

Back in the kitchen, Oz tried to be as quiet as he could but he had to move some dishes in the fridge to get at the Coke and grimaced as they clinked together. As he backed up with his hands full, the door thudded shut, causing the dishes to clink alarmingly once more. Yet it wasn't the noise that made the breath suddenly catch in Oz's throat. He was staring at a calendar stuck to the fridge door by four cake slice-shaped magnets. The calendar had scribbles on it, like, "order four pints milk," and "hygienist - 9 o'clock." But it wasn't what was written on the calendar that Oz's

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nervous glance took in. It was how it was hanging. The thudding of the fridge door had displaced a magnet, causing the corner of the calendar to slip. Behind it, on a sheet of paper, was a crude drawing. And it was the single, dark, canine ear now revealed in this drawing that made Oz's stomach lurch.

Once, when things had been very bad, before she'd started the tablets that had helped make her better, Oz had tried asking his mother what exactly was wrong with her. It had been a particularly bad dressing-gown day of constant crying and not eating and Oz had felt more than usually helpless. With a huge effort she'd looked up at him, sensing for once his desperation, her face full of pleading, her voice a hollow whisper.

"Since Michael has gone, it's like there's this old black dog that keeps following me around, Oz," she said, shivering. "He's always there no matter what I do to try and shake him off. And whenever I look at him he makes me feel so sad and lonely."

Oz had gone to the window and looked outside. There'd been no sign of a dog, but when he'd finally managed to get back to Mrs Evans' class at Hurley Street Juniors, he'd drawn an ugly old black mutt in felt pen. At the end of the year he'd taken home all his artwork and promptly forgot all about it until, months later when she was better, Mrs Chambers had found the drawing and pinned it up on the fridge door, fixed the calendar over the top of it to hide it and explained that this could be their signal. If ever she was beginning to feel sad again, she'd shift the calendar so that some of the dog was showing. And if Oz thought that she was acting strangely, he could do the same. She'd called it their early warning sign. Mostly, the calendar hung square over the picture. But sometimes, Oz had come down to the kitchen in the morning and found that a bit of the dog's ear was showing or perhaps half its head and he'd known that he'd have to be careful and not stress his mother out too much.

He looked at the badly drawn bit of ear again now and breathed in and out to let the ripple of anxiety fade. It was just a kid's drawing under a calendar after all, wasn't it? A calendar that was too thick to be held in place by four rubber magnets, which had a tendency to slip if you closed the fridge door too hard. It was stupid to think of the ear as an omen of any kind. After all, his mother hadn't moved the calendar for months now and she was fine; she'd just made brain pâté, for cripes' sake. He repositioned the calendar to hide the drawing completely and looked up, pushing all that stuff to the back of his mind.

Through the kitchen window the night beyond looked inky and solid, the only lights coming from the backs of the smaller houses in Tottridge Street. He imagined being in one of those tiny houses on a night like this with Ellie and Ruff. Yet no matter how hard he tried, he knew it just wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't have ceilings that looked like they should be in an art gallery or a chandelier with a hunting falcon as its centrepiece. In other words, it just wouldn't be Penwurt. He held on to that pleasant thought as he made his way back to the dorm.

He decided to set his watch alarm for half past three as he climbed up the staircase, so he put the Coke bottle down to adjust the settings. There was no sound at all in the atrium as midnight approached, but outside, the wind moaned as it gusted around the stone walls and beams creaked as the old place resisted the elements. Oz finished adjusting his watch and was reaching down to pick up the bottle when he heard something.

Footsteps.

Oz looked up suddenly. Maybe Ellie wanted something else from the kitchen. More likely it would be Ruff. But there was no one there.

He started to climb the stairs again. Must have been his imag...Oz stopped and stood stock-still. There it was again.

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Definitely footsteps. Soft and deliberate and sounding very near. The hairs on his arms stood to attention. He swivelled around. The atrium was empty. Except for the faint moaning of the wind, the only other noise he could hear were the hammers of his heart pounding out a drum roll.

Then the footsteps came again; unmistakable this time. Oz tilted his head to try and pinpoint exactly where they were coming from. Not above. Not below. Suddenly Oz realised he was standing on the step below the first floor landing. Whatever was making that noise was behind the wall separating him from the rooms beyond. Someone or something was walking across the floor in one of those rooms; rooms that had been locked up for years. He craned his neck to listen. The noise had died. He took another step forward and...something tapped on the wall just next to where he was standing. Oz jumped and almost dropped the Coke bottle. He had to stuff his fist in his mouth to stop from crying out. He leapt up the remaining stairs and through the oak door into the dorm. The shock must have shown in his face because Ruff frowned the minute he entered.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

Oz put his fingers to his lips and tiptoed across to where Ellie and Ruff were sitting with the Xbox switched on.

“What is it?” Ellie asked.

“Turn that off and listen,” Oz commanded in a whisper.

“O-oz,” Ellie said with an accusatory stare.

“Shhh. This is not a wind-up, honestly,” Oz whispered again. “Just wait.”

They did. For a very long thirty seconds until...thud...thud...thud...thud.

“What the buzzard...” Ruff whispered.

“Are they...?” Ellie asked.

“Footsteps? Yes, they are,” Oz said.

“Whose?” breathed Ellie.

“Dunno, but they’re coming from downstairs. From rooms that have been locked up for as long as we’ve been here.”

Oz, Ellie and Ruff stared at each other with searchlight eyes. It was Ruff that broke the stalemate.

“Sounds like *Hidden Haunted Houses of Britain* got it right, then,” he said, swallowing loudly.

Ellie shook her head but she too kept her voice low. “There’s probably a perfectly normal explanation.”

“Is there?” Oz said. “Like I said, as far as I know those rooms have been boarded up for years.”

“Maybe it’s your mum playing a trick on us,” Ruff said waveringly.

“Mum? You heard her. She was more nervous than anyone about us coming here. She’s on emergency standby to come and rescue us, remember? No way is that my mother.”

“Then who is it?” Ellie asked.

“Or what is it?” Ruff mumbled.

Oz and Ellie exchanged glances before Ellie shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“Well, there’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?” Oz said finally.

“You’re not going to go looking?” Ruff asked, horrified.

But Ellie’s face lit up at the suggestion and she reached into her pocket for her mobile. “We totally should. I’ve got three megapixels on my camera phone. We’d make loads of money if we got a picture of it.”

“Wait a minute,” Ruff said. “If it isn’t someone trying to scare us, then maybe it’s burglars.”

“What’s there to burgle?” Oz said with a scornful laugh.

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“Okay, but we don’t know, do we?” Ruff pressed on. “I don’t think it’s a brilliant idea to just barge in. It could be really dangerous. In Spirit World Three, there’s this ghoul and...”

“Xbox games again, Ruff?” Ellie said, her head tilted in a scathing glare.

“Loads of these games are based on real legends,” Ruff said defensively.

“I’m sure they are,” Ellie said, “just as I’m sure that you’re just a little bit scared.”

“Don’t tell me you’re not a bit scared too.” Ruff glared back.

Ellie just smiled at him.

Ruff shook his head. “All I’m saying is that we ought to be really careful. Maybe I should stay outside on watch, just in case.”

“Okay, fair point,” Oz said. “But there are three of us. What could possibly happen to the three –”

The muted thud of more footsteps filtered up from somewhere beneath them once again and Oz never finished his sentence.

“So how do we get in?” Ellie whispered, her eyes glinting with anticipation.

“I know where the key to the padlock is,” Oz said. “Stay here.”

Chapter 2

The Ghostly Footsteps

The key was on a key ring hanging behind the door of the cupboard under the sink in the laundry room. Oz met Ellie and Ruff on the stairs outside the padlocked door on the orphanage's first floor landing.

"So, what's the plan?" Oz whispered.

Ellie shrugged and sent Ruff a disparaging glance. "If we're doing this we're doing it together, according to him."

"But I thought –"

Ellie shook her head. "Ruff's too stubborn to stay outside even though I pointed out that I'm the one that does martial arts if anything does happen –"

"Yeah, but it was never my idea to go looking anyway –"

"Okay, okay," Oz said. "We'll all go."

As quietly as he could, Oz slid the key into the padlock and felt the mechanism click smoothly open. In seconds he had the chain on the floor in a serpentine loop.

"This door is bound to creak," Ellie hissed a warning.

But it didn't. Instead it opened smoothly and silently and a draft of stale, dank, freezing air wafted over their faces. It was like stepping into a cave. Four doors led off the corridor. They were all shut.

"Which door do you reckon?" Ruff whispered.

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“Not sure,” Oz whispered back. “Let’s wait to see if we hear it again.”

The door swung silently shut behind them, plunging them into darkness. But Oz didn’t flick on his torch, worried in case it gave them away. In pitch-blackness and with Oz in the lead, they crept forward with Ellie hanging on to Oz’s jumper and Ruff at the rear hanging on to hers. Nothing happened for three long minutes. Oz’s mind was churning. Was what was in one of these rooms a lost soul? Or could it be that waiting for them was something dark and horrible, intent on doing them real harm like in Ruff’s Spirit World Three? He wanted to ask Ellie and Ruff if they were thinking the same thing but common sense told him to keep quiet. He couldn’t see anything and all he could hear was Ellie’s steady breathing behind him. Finally, after what seemed like an age, he put his finger on the torch’s switch and was about to flick it on when it happened. Inches away, they heard the footsteps again.

“Second door,” whispered Oz urgently, and reached out his hand to feel for the handle. “Ready? On three, one, two...”

“Go,” Ellie and Ruff said in high-pitched unison.

Pulse accelerating madly, Oz flicked on the torch and thrust the door open. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, an apparition? Something spectral and ghostly? At the very least a creeping thief in a balaclava...But what he wasn’t expecting was what was revealed to the three of them as they stepped across the threshold. In the stark light of the torch beam, the room in which seconds before they had all distinctly heard footsteps was completely and utterly empty.

They scoured the room in the torchlight but found no sign of any footsteps in the dust that lay thick and undisturbed on the floor. Ellie took half a dozen pictures, but all they showed was more yards of dark panelling with huge cobwebs dangling from

the dusty corners like net curtains. There was no other door in or out, nor any sign of occupation. And somehow, that made it worse.

“What time is it?” asked Ellie as they stood near the one window that looked out onto the garden. She shivered, but Oz wasn’t sure it was entirely from the cold.

“Five past midnight,” Oz said, squinting at his watch.

“Looks like we’ve frightened it off.” Ruff shone his torch into the four corners of the room one last time. There was no denying the relief in his voice.

“It? Aren’t ghosts supposed to be the spirits of people?” Ellie said.

“Yeah,” Ruff said as if he was talking to a three-year-old, “but it hasn’t left a name and address, has it?”

Oz breathed on a window pane and drew a ghostly shape in the misty circle. “Well, if it really was a ghost, then the answer as to who it was must be here at Penwurt somewhere.”

“Okay. So where do we start?” Ruff asked.

Oz looked at Ellie and they said in unison, “The library.”

They hurried out and Oz sensed that the others, like him, were glad to be away from that room. They made their way back to the main house without speaking and went straight to the spiral staircase that led upstairs. But when they got to the second floor landing, Oz put up his hand and peered upwards.

“There’s a light on in Caleb’s room,” he whispered.

“And I can hear voices,” Ellie added.

There were voices. They were low and barely audible, but the rise and fall of the intonation suggested that a discussion was taking place. Oz crept forward and called out, “Ummm, hello? Anybody there?”

The voices stopped. There was the scraping of a chair on block flooring and a voice said, “Oz, is that you?”

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“Caleb?”

Caleb Jones’ rooms were on the same second floor of Penwurt as Oz’s, but on the other side of the spiral stairwell that separated the two wings. Caleb had been renting those rooms for almost as long as the Chambers had owned the house. It was pure luck that he’d been looking for somewhere at exactly the time that Oz’s mum and dad had started looking for tenants. And as a colleague of Dr Michael Chambers in the history department of the university, he’d also been the first to hear that they were renting. But he was not alone in his sitting room that night. At the table with him and looking her usual misery-guts self was one of the other tenants, Lucy Bishop.

“What are you three doing wandering around at this hour?” she said frostily. She was a small, thin girl with elfin features, short dark hair and a constantly intense expression. Her clothes were shapeless and fashionably drab and she’d gone for “backwards through a hedge” as a hairstyle with great success. Her chosen subject at the university was history of art, though Oz hadn’t seen her show much interest in Penwurt at all, which to him seemed full of all sorts of interesting history as well as art.

“It is Halloween,” Ellie said.

“Yeah, and we were in the orphanage and we heard this – ow!” Ruff’s sharp exclamation of pain was the result of Oz’s shoed foot meeting with his ankle.

“Owl,” Oz said in a flash of brilliant inspiration. “Hooting, you know.”

“And...we were having a discussion about the house and decided to find out a bit more about it,” Ellie explained, taking her lead from Oz.

Lucy Bishop stared at them blankly.

“The Bunthorpe Encounter? You must have heard of it?” Ellie added.

Caleb's eyes crinkled in an almost smile which he disguised under a cheek massaging hand. He was thin with longish brown hair and always looked to Oz as if he needed a shave. But even though he hardly ever smiled and had a deep furrow in his forehead that lent him a slightly fierce look, Oz still felt that there was a softer centre under the stern exterior – though it was sometimes quite hard to find.

“The old place spook you a bit then, did it?” Caleb asked.

“Sort of,” Ruff muttered through clenched teeth as he rubbed his other foot against his sore ankle.

“You two are working late,” Oz said to deflect attention away from Ruff's grimacing.

“Are you sure your mother approves of you wandering about at all hours like this?” Lucy Bishop said crossly.

“It was Mrs Chambers that made us our feast,” explained Ellie.

“Kids should be in bed at this time of night.”

“Hang on, this is Oz's house –” Ruff's voice rose in protest.

But Oz cut him off. “Sorry if we've interrupted something.”

“You haven't,” Caleb said calmly. “We were just discussing an essay that Lucy is having problems with, but we can do that another time.”

Lucy Bishop pushed herself away from the table and stood. “Of course we can,” she said pointedly. “No rush. No pressure. I have all the time in the world.”

She didn't look at any of them as she stomped out of the room.

“Who threw her toys out of the buzzard pram?” Ruff asked after she'd gone.

“She's just a bit tired,” Caleb explained. “And you three look like you've just seen a ghost.”

No one answered.

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Caleb studied the three of them. “Look, I’m about to turn in, but how about I make us all a hot chocolate first. Good antidote for the jitters.”

“I’m in,” Ruff said quickly.

No one was surprised by that.

They followed Caleb down some wooden stairs that led to the ground floor of the east wing which, in grander times, had been the servants’ quarters. Three minutes later they were sitting at the table in the kitchen Caleb shared with the other tenants, sipping hot chocolate from steaming mugs. One of Mrs Chambers’ rules was that Oz was not to bother the paying guests too much. Since Lucy Bishop wore the constant look of someone who’d just opened the door of a sewerage plant by mistake, and the third tenant was another student of about the same age as her called Tim Perkins who seemed altogether a bit too chirpy for his own good, Oz had found it no hardship. But with Caleb, it was different. He’d known Oz’s dad well and although he kept a polite distance as a lodger, Oz had always found him a brilliant source of information on just about anything.

“If it’s Bunthorpe you want to know about,” Caleb said, “you might try *A Short History of Seabourne’s Ancient Houses*. There’s a copy upstairs in the library. But to cut a long story short, in 1761, something happened in a barn on this very site. An apparition appeared out of thin air. It even spoke. Four people, respectable churchgoers, all witnessed the same thing and they claimed it was a ghost. Of course in those days superstition was rife. Someone didn’t like the thought of the barn being haunted and so it ended up being burned to the ground.”

“Do you think there’s anything to it?” Oz asked after a long moment’s silence.

Caleb inclined his head thoughtfully. “There’s no doubt that this place is a bit special.”

“But do you think it’s haunted?” Ellie asked, her expression intent.

“Let’s put it this way, I believe that some places attract strangeness like a magnet. Perhaps it’s something to do with where they’re sited or something about how they were built, I don’t know. But too many strange things have taken place here to be put down to sheer coincidence.”

“It’s not just Bunthorpe we wanted to know about, it’s the orphanage too,” Oz said quickly.

“Ah well.” Caleb clutched his mug in both hands. “This place is old, eighteenth century. But the orphanage, as you call it, that dates back to Jacobean times – the sixteen hundreds. The original house was built by an abbot. He put it on top of an old fortification that was there long before that. Bunthorpe barn was literally next door. When it was burned to the ground, the squire bought the land and the old abbot’s house. He built two new wings and joined them on to try to make it a property suitable for a squire and his family. That was finished in 1770.”

“Was it him that painted the ceilings and stuff?” Ruff asked.

Caleb shook his head. “The abbot started it all, but Squire Worthy did some too. The paintings tell stories, you know. Proverbs and life histories. Amazing, aren’t they?”

“So it became an orphanage after that?” Ellie said.

“Almost a hundred years later, yes. And it stayed an orphanage until the end of the First World War. I think the last orphan left around 1920.”

“And after that?” Oz probed. Caleb was better than Google.

“Then it became the property of one Daniel Morsman, who had been an orphan here himself.”

“Blimey,” Ruff said. “Liked it so much he bought the place.”

“Was he famous then?” Ellie asked.

“In his time. Bit of an explorer.”

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“So then came Great Aunt Bessy and after that my dad, right?”

“Absolutely,” Caleb nodded. He paused to sip his hot chocolate before asking, “I assume you all know what Penwurt means?”

Oz knew, of course, but Ellie and Ruff shook their heads.

“It’s a mixture of Celtic and Old English. Pen is the Celtic for hill, and Wurt comes from Old English or German. It meant fate or destiny. But weird and odd will do just as well. So, it’s the hill where weird things happen and odd things have indeed been happening in exactly the spot we’re sitting in now for a long, long time.”

Suddenly, the back door rattled and Ruff jumped off his seat with fright. Oz too almost spilled his hot chocolate as the door flew open and a creature wearing dirty, dust-covered clothes, its hair matted with cobwebs, face smeared with dirt and its jeans torn, shambled in.

“Oh, hi,” said Tim Perkins to the startled group sitting at the table.

“What happened to you?” Ruff asked with his mouth hanging open.

“Me?” Tim asked, momentarily nonplussed. “Oh, you mean my clothes?”

“And your hair,” Ellie said. “I hope you didn’t tip your hairdresser.”

Tim looked at his reflection in the kitchen window. “Go on, be honest, would I pass muster as one of the un-dead, do you think??”

“Not,” Ellie muttered dubiously.

“I thought I’d done well,” Tim said, sounding crestfallen, “but the others at the party said I looked like a painter and decorator that had fallen asleep in a corner for two years.”

“Fancy dress?” asked Caleb.

"All I could come up with," Tim explained, and took in the hot chocolate. "You four look nice and cosy."

"The three musketeers here have been Halloweening in the old orphanage."

"Ah." Tim grinned. "That must have been fun."

"Buzzard," Ruff said, smiling.

Oz shot him a disbelieving glance. Clearly, the beverage was working its magic and morphing what had been quite a scary supernatural experience into a great adventure in Ruff's hot chocolate-mellowed mind.

Tim frowned as if he'd misheard and was thinking about asking Ruff something else, but then decided against it and just stood watching them and grinning good-naturedly for several long seconds. "Right," he said finally. "I'm going to hit the shower. Oz, tell your mum that I'd be happy to have a go at that guttering for her. I've managed to borrow a long ladder, okay?"

"Fine," Oz said without the faintest idea of what he was talking about.

"He seems quite...helpful," Ellie said when Tim had gone.

"Doesn't he just," Caleb said in a way that made them all glance at him. But his face remained inscrutable.

By one o'clock, they'd finally decided that going back to the orphanage was not a great idea. They would leave attacking the library until first thing next morning and, after Ruff set up an infectious bout of yawning, they all agreed that bed was probably the best option. Twenty minutes later, Oz lay in his, duvet up under his chin, mulling over the evening's events and not feeling the least bit tired. His stomach groaned under the internal pressure of one too many freaky fingers.

But it wasn't indigestion that was keeping sleep away. Since the conversation with Caleb, an idea had taken root in his head and was growing with every minute. The thought that Penwurt

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really was haunted thrilled Oz. He'd always known that it was a different sort of place and the mysterious footsteps merely confirmed what he'd suspected. He still vividly remembered the day they'd first driven here after hearing that his dad had inherited the place. The Chambers had sat in the car outside like a gang of potential burglars, looking at it in silent awe.

"It's huge," Oz had said.

"It's brilliant," replied his dad. "Just look at those bartizans and those mullioned windows and that turret at the top. I bet you can see for miles from there. And this street, can't you feel it?"

Previously, they'd lived on the outskirts of the town in a small house that had been modern and identical to a hundred others on a sprawling new estate. But in the car on that first day, Gwen Chambers went very quiet.

"I dread to think what it will cost to heat," she muttered.

Michael Chambers turned to her, his eyes shining with excitement, his grin infectious.

"We'll take in lodgers. The university is always looking for accommodation."

Mrs Chambers had merely smiled wanly. In that smile was the knowledge that she'd lost the battle before it had even started.

So began the adventure.

And in the seven or so months before the accident, what an adventure it had been. Oz and his dad explored the house and almost every week found something new and surprising that they could investigate and enthuse over. Great Aunt Bessy had done little in the way of decoration since the middle of the last century and much of the old house was hung with ancient photographs and portraits of stern-faced people.

Oz could still clearly remember his dad's whoops of delight whenever he came across a spectacular section of fancy Georgian tiling over an ornate washstand, or another sepia print of some

Edwardian gathering; the women in long dark dresses and the men moustachioed and proud, posing with their chests out. Even now, Oz still half expected to turn a corner and find his dad studying some antique, or stroll into the library to find him running his fingers over the oak panelling, his face full of enchantment.

“There’s something about this place,” he’d say, looking up at Oz and grinning. “Something strange and timeless. I can feel it in every creak of these old beams.”

Memory brought with it a sudden constriction in Oz’s throat and wetness to his eyes. It was over two years since Michael Chambers had walked out of the door to begin one of his expeditions, never to return. That was the last time Oz had seen him alive. A freak accident as he’d travelled home from the airport had seen to that. More than anything, Oz regretted that he’d never properly said goodbye to his father. He’d been too busy doing something mindless the morning his dad had left. And since that day and his mother’s illness, Penwurt had lost some of its sparkle.

But after tonight, Oz had the strangest, most tantalising conviction that they’d inadvertently stumbled upon one of the house’s secrets. Recaptured somehow that promise that had excited his dad so much. And he wasn’t frightened, not in the least. In fact, quite the opposite; he felt a warm glow spread up from his toes to the top of his head just thinking about it. He basked in it, revelling in the possibilities his imagination was throwing up. Caleb had said that some places attracted strangeness like a magnet. At that moment, Oz could think of no better way to describe Penwurt.

Chapter 3

Pheeps

The next morning, both Ruff and Ellie had breakfast dressed in their football kit of maroon and blue stripes. They both played in the same mixed Sunday League side and usually ended up having a kick about on Sunday mornings with Oz before they went to their game. But this morning, they headed straight to the library.

“What’s the big attraction?” a suspicious Mrs Chambers asked over breakfast.

“Uh, just want to go over my English essay with Ellie and Ruff,” Oz explained.

“Schoolwork? Be still my beating heart.” She made a great show of collapsing into a chair. Ruff and Ellie giggled. Oz just shook his head sadly.

As he made his way up the turnpike stone staircase, Oz avoided the curved iron handrail and let his fingers trace the uneven plasterwork of the walls. Beneath his feet the steps were worn down by centuries of use so that they dipped in the middle. This was what he so loved about Penwurt; all of it was old, but parts of it were much, much older than others. The spiral stairs continued past the second floor and opened out into the library itself. It was a cold clear morning and rays of November sunshine slanted through the glass turret at the top of the library’s vaulted

ceiling, turning the oak panelling into molten gold. Wheels of strange symbols were carved into two of the walls. In one corner stood a four-foot-high globe atlas in a walnut stand with an antique world map in faded colours. Oz especially liked the inked sailing ship in the Pacific, which seemed to glide majestically under its own power whenever he spun the orb from west to east.

As always the room smelled of leather and wood and old books and Oz drank it in. This was where Oz's dad had been happiest, where Oz still felt closest to him. The slanting rays of morning light revealed a million dancing dust motes. Oz always thought they looked just like tiny nuggets of knowledge that ebbed and flowed in and out of the books and walls; microscopic secrets that could be breathed in and absorbed. While he and Ellie searched for information, Ruff seemed more interested in the wooden panelling.

"These are so buzzard amazing," he said.

"So you keep telling us," Ellie said, reaching up for a battered-looking anthology of *The Seabourne Chronicle*.

"Look at all these symbols." Ruff let his fingers trace the carvings that covered two panelled walls. "Think it's a code?"

"I think you're spending too much time on *Labyrinth Quest* on the Xbox," Oz muttered.

Ruff looked up. "Hey, I'm only on level four. There're six more to complete." He turned back to inspect the panels, muttering distractedly. "Think there's any hidden treasure in this old place, Oz? And if we found any would you split it with us? Maybe I wouldn't have to help my dad paint freezing chalets if we found a hidden lost masterpiece, or a medieval chalice or something. You know, I bet there are secret passages behind these walls."

"Well, I wish you'd hurry up and find them so you could get lost in one. We're supposed to be doing research here," Ellie said irritably.

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“There’s no need to get your thong in a knot.”

Ellie looked up. “So why aren’t you helping?”

“I am. Look, I found *A Short History of Seabourne’s Ancient Houses* after five minutes.” Ruff picked up a mouldy-looking leather-bound book from the desk.

Oz was busy thumbing through a battered photograph album of the orphanage full of faded prints of strangely dressed children and stern-looking women in long crinoline dresses. Some of the photos had fallen out of their mountings and others had become so old they’d snapped in half. But some were intact and Oz found one from 1892 that had names printed in the legend at the bottom. He recognised one of them: a happy, gap-toothed boy sitting cross-legged on the floor gazed back at him from a group photo of thirty kids. He had his arm around the neck of the boy next to him and Oz wasn’t quite sure if this was through affection or if it was a malicious headlock. The name in copperplate beneath read “Daniel Morsman.”

“That’s just one book, Ruff,” Oz said absently as he concentrated on trying to decipher some of the other faded names.

“Yeah, but it’s got all the stuff about Bunthorpe in it. Listen.” He thumbed it open to a marked page and read.

On that Saturday evening, a rehearsal of bell ringing was taking place in the barn at Bunthorpe owned by one Redmayne, a horse trader. ’Twas said that during a ferocious gust of wind, the doors to the barn flew open and there was a great clap of thunder, tho the sky remained clear and the weather warm. One bell ringer, a shopkeeper of sound mind, witnessed the sudden appearance of an obsidian pebble on the floor of the barn bathed in a glow of bright light. All eight bell ringers then did swear to seeing an apparition appear glowing and a’shimmering. Some swore to hearing music of a strange melody and others to words from the mouth of the

apparition that had become the shape of a girl. Naturally, the bell ringers all took fright and fled. Later that night at around midnight, a fierce fire consumed the building. A farmhand returning from a tavern persuaded Redmayne that ne'er do wells were seen setting the barn alight, but no one yet has been brought to account.

"You sound like a Cornish farmer," Oz said, laughing at Ruff's accent.

"It's the language," Ruff explained, grinning. "Sort of makes you speak like that if you read it out loud."

"Let's have a look," Ellie said, shaking her head and putting down the old bible she'd found before reaching for Ruff's book. "It's from something called the *Weekly Journal* and the date is 1761."

"What do you think an obsidian pebble is?" Ruff asked.

"Dunno," Oz said.

Ruff shrugged "Still, at least we know the Bunthorpe ghost was a girl now."

"But there's no clue as to who she was," Ellie murmured after reading on for a couple of minutes.

"And Caleb said that after the fire, some squire bloke buys the land and builds this house on it," Oz said, his eyes narrowing. "What we really need to find out about now is whether this squire saw the ghost, or if anyone else later on did, when it was an orphanage."

"What time is it?" Ellie asked, suddenly turning to Ruff.

"Almost ten," Ruff said.

"What time's your dad picking us up, eleven?"

Ruff nodded. "Kick-off's at half past."

Ellie made a face. "We really ought to get warmed up. We're playing the Skullers today and I don't want to be stiff getting out on that field."

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"So let's go over to the park," Oz said.

"But what about the ghost?" Ruff asked

"Didn't think we'd honestly crack that in half an hour, did you?" Oz said. "No, we need to get organised. Make a plan. Research it properly."

"Cool," Ellie said, nodding.

"Buzzard" Ruff said, grinning.

Ellie was making for the stairs but then turned back and retraced her steps. "Do you think your mum would mind if I borrowed some of these books?" she asked, holding up the mouldy specimen in which Ruff had found the Bunthorpe report.

"Oh yeah, she reads that every night in bed," Oz said with a straight face.

Luckily, Ellie held back from throwing it because it was heavy and would have undoubtedly hurt a lot if it had connected with his head.

In the park, they put down their backpacks as goals and while Ellie and Ruff alternated between defence and attack, Oz played in goal. The ground was soft and Oz revelled in diving on to the grass whenever one of the other two sent a shot his way. After one particularly spectacular save, an out of breath Ellie stood in front of him and put both hands on her hips.

"Why don't you come and play with us, Oz?"

"Yeah," Ruff added. "You're way better than our pants goalie."

Oz threw the ball back out to them and shook his head. "Can't. Have to finish my homework. Besides, Mum wants me to go shopping."

"What about next Sunday? I know your mum wouldn't mind."

"Busy. The Fanshaws are having a party."

"The week after, then?"

"No thanks," Oz said resolutely.

"But why? You're an amazing goalie."

“Just don’t fancy it. Besides, those colours don’t suit me.”

“O-oz,” protested Ellie.

But they’d been here before. Many times, in fact. Oz had his reasons, but they weren’t for sharing even with his two best mates. Luckily for him, a white van pulled up in the car park at that moment.

“Here’s your dad,” Oz announced to Ruff, glad of the chance to deflect the conversation.

The other two grabbed their stuff and headed for the van.

“So what are you doing the rest of the day?” Ellie asked, still a bit miffed by Oz’s rejection of their offer.

“Maths, English essay, shopping. Buzzard, as someone might say.”

“English doesn’t have to be in until Wednesday,” Ruff said. “I haven’t even started it yet.”

“Some of us managed to get it all done despite being in Centre Parks with a million cousins wanting to play Scrabble or go swimming or biking every single minute of the day,” Ellie said, turning haughtily away with her nose in the air.

“Yeah, well not everyone’s perfect,” Ruff said.

“So I’ve noticed.” Ellie gave him a hundred-watt smile and ducked just in time to avoid the thrown football. They clambered into the van and Oz watched them leave

“Best of luck,” he shouted after them. “And watch out for the Skullers’ dirty tricks.”

“We will,” Ruff yelled back. “Don’t you worry.”

“See you tomorrow, Oz,” yelled Ellie.

Oz walked back through the quiet streets with that word “tomorrow” ringing in his ears. Tomorrow meant school. Yes, he’d see Ellie and Ruff all day, but Seabourne County was pretty big and full of all kinds of people, not all of whom Oz enjoyed

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the company of. And then of course there was homework. Oz groaned inwardly. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

He exited the park and crossed a few roads and then turned a corner into Magnus Street. Fifteen yards along the pavement he passed a parked people carrier with all its windows rolled down. The four occupants, a man, a woman and two small children, had their heads poking out of the windows and were staring up at the houses, nostrils flaring.

"Say, excuse me?" said the driver as Oz walked by. "Do you live around here?"

Oz turned. "Yes, I do."

The driver wore a baseball cap and a golf shirt stretched across a chest that was very broad, but not as broad as the belly beneath it. Written on the cap was the word "Broncos."

"This is a mighty fine street with its architecture and gardens and all. And old, I guess?"

Oz nodded. "Some of the houses are sixteenth century."

"Sixteenth century?" He turned to the woman in the passenger seat. "You hear that, Darlene? Sixteenth century. Holy moly."

Oz wasn't surprised to see them there. After all, Magnus Street was on the visitor's map under "Historic Seabourne; a grand street where years ago the Great and the Good built large impressive houses so that everyone would know how important they were."

The man in the baseball cap regarded Oz. "Guess it's seen better days, but what is it we can smell?"

"Smell?" Oz said, suppressing a smile.

"Yeah. We've driven all over Scotland and the North of England –"

"And Wales, Daddy," said a small voice from the back. "Remember, all those funny names?"

“Wales too, but we’ve never come across anything like this.” The man frowned and shook his head. “We’ve been up and down this street half a dozen times and we still can’t figure it out. Fact is it doesn’t really smell of anything I can put my finger on. But it’s so darned zingy, makes you just want to suck it all in and then do it over again.”

“What might happen.” Oz nodded and smiled. “That’s what you can smell. Whole street’s full of it.”

He turned to walk away and left them staring after him. There was no point continuing the conversation because he’d already given them the only answer he knew. There were nicer, more colourful and brighter streets by the dozen in Seabourne, of that there was no doubt. And to the casual observer the houses on both sides did look a little run down and in need of a lick of paint.

Yet there was something about Magnus Street – some hard to define quality that no one could quite explain. It was as if the atmosphere was thick with the suggestion of things yet to be and the tantalising promise that they were just around the corner. Oz was forever seeing gawping tourists ambling about getting frozen noses on freezing February days and drenched in December downpours. But if you really pinned them down as to why they lingered, all you ever got was a far away look in their eyes and a shake of the head and perhaps a mumbled, “...didn’t want to miss anything.”

Oz started whistling as he crossed the road – not because he liked the tune particularly – it was just that turning into Magnus Street tended to make you do things like that. He strolled past number 21, which was a posh architect’s office, admiring the bright blue walls and gleaming silver nameplates as he went. He lingered a bit at number 11, which was a bed and breakfast’s

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called "Sleep Easy," because it had a friendly dog that sometimes licked his fingers through the gate.

He usually returned to the even side of the street just before number 3, but today he continued past it so that he could inspect their decorations. Wispy spider's webs had been sprayed all over the front gate and on the path to the front door. Half a dozen pumpkins of various sizes sat plump and orange between some luridly coloured pottery toads on the porch. Above them, a joke bat with ridiculously long fangs dangled from the roof, while two large stuffed ravens stood guard on the steps over a slumped skeleton, its head resting on a gravestone with R.I.P. written shakily upon it. Oz smiled. The Fanshaw twins who lived at number 3 certainly knew how to put on a show.

Oz crossed the street, pulled open the gate and was on the point of pushing it shut when he hesitated and walked back out to look at the gatepost. He knelt and pulled aside a wisteria branch that had grown to almost cover the post completely. Beneath was an old plaque, once shiny but now green and weathered. Oz ran his fingers over the faded sign and allowed himself a smile as he read: Colonel Thompson's Home for Destitute Children. He wondered if any orphans had ever heard footsteps at midnight in the creaky old rooms.

After lunch, Oz went shopping with his mother for school shoes and jeans. He had tried desperately to explain that there was nothing at all wrong with his current shoes, but when his mother went to fetch them and put three fingers through the gap between the sole and the upper, he shut up. And anyway, he really did need some new jeans.

He didn't mind shopping, as long as it was for no longer than about an hour. After that, something started to happen to his brain. He found himself just saying yes to whatever the sales

assistant suggested so as to get out of the shop as quickly as he could, and usually ended up hating whatever it was he'd bought as soon as he got home. How some people could actually enjoy the process he had no idea.

"Just like your father," was all Mrs Chambers ever said when Oz drifted into bored and miserable mode.

As it was they'd got jeans within twenty minutes and the shoes had taken only another half hour, so Oz was about at his limit by the time they got to the supermarket. Still, there he could at least mess about by riding the shopping trolley and browsing the latest DVDs. But it wasn't their usual supermarket and, because it was near the middle of the town, the shop had decided to stop anyone from taking a trolley off the premises by installing special wheels that locked as soon as they crossed a magical yellow line painted on the floor. So, grumpy and laden with shopping bags, Oz trudged after his mother towards the multi-storey. All he wanted to do was go home and have some tea, but Mrs Chambers wasn't quite finished yet.

"Hang on just a sec, Oz," she said as they passed another row of shops.

Oz groaned. The grocery bags were cutting into his fingers like cheese wires.

"What do you think of this one?" Mrs Chambers asked.

Grudgingly, Oz walked over to the shop window. To his surprise, all he could see were small photographs of houses. He followed his mother's pointing finger.

"Very nice," Oz said. "If you like that sort of thing."

"Exactly. Imagine just having to look after three rooms downstairs and three up," Mrs Chambers said with what Oz suddenly twigged was an alarming degree of longing. He glanced up at the name above the window.

Gerber and Callow, Estate Agents.

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"You're not serious, are you?"

"Why not?" Mrs Chambers said, eyes bright with excitement.

"But...Penwurt's our house and it's brilliant. It's –"

"Huge and expensive to run," interrupted Mrs Chambers. "It needs a new roof, the council tax is enough to turn your hair white and it needs decorating so badly, it's only at Halloween it looks half presentable."

"Yeah but...I mean, it was given to Dad."

Oz saw his mother's shoulder's slump. "I know, Oz," she said awkwardly, "It's just that –"

She was cut off by a man's theatrically cheerful voice behind them.

"And what do we have here? Is it a pair of Chamber pots I see?"

Oz and Mrs Chambers turned as one. The voice belonged to a dapper-looking man with what looked like a bedraggled crow on his head, but which Oz quickly realised was a windswept toupee. Lorenzo Heeps' eyebrows were as dark as the crow hair, but his moustache was grey flecked and pencil thin. He was wearing a suit and tie under a fawn trench coat.

"Lorenzo," said Mrs Chambers. "What a nice surprise."

"Looking to move, Gwen? Had enough of Penwurt?"

"Just testing the water," she said with a nervous glance at Oz. "Just seeing how property is doing, you know."

"Badly," Heeps said, shaking his head. "Wrong time to sell or buy. Of course, an exceptional property like yours in a desirable part of town like Magnus Street could fetch a premium at any time." He smiled a cheesy smile and smoothed down a jet-black eyebrow. Lorenzo Heeps worked at the university and had known Oz's dad quite well.

"Yes, well...oh, hello Phillipa," Mrs Chambers said.

Phillipa Heeps, or Pheeps as Oz liked to call her, was standing behind her father, dressed as if she'd just stepped out from one of the shop windows. Oz couldn't remember ever seeing her with a hair out of place, a shirt untucked or a smidgen of a smudge on her pressed jeans or skirt. Today, as usual, her fair hair was styled perfectly so that it hung over one hazel brown eye in a carefully combed fringe. She was, he supposed, quite pretty in the way a carefully cared for doll might be. But it was a package spoiled by a cruel mouth that enjoyed gossip and whispers far too much. Her smile in response to Mrs Chambers' greeting looked about as genuine as one of the Fanshaws' pottery toads.

"Hello Mrs Chambers. Hello Oz," she said brightly.

Oz mumbled a grudging "Hi," which earned a frowning glance from his mother.

"It is so nice to see you," Heeps gushed as he and Mrs Chambers walked slowly down the street. "We really ought to get together to catch up. If you ever need any advice, I do know a little bit about the housing market, you know. In fact, I consider myself something of an expert and I am a personal acquaintance of Mr Gerber, who as well as being Seabourne's most successful businessman is, as you know, a generous supporter of the university..."

Oz tuned out their conversation and shook his head. There were lots of words he could use to describe Heeps; unbearable and opinionated bore were just the first three to spring to mind. He sighed. The weight of the groceries was proving to be just a little too much for him and he suddenly had an urge to plonk the heavy bags down on the pavement and rub at the marks on his hand.

"Careful, you might do yourself an injury," Pheeps said in a low, mean voice meant only for Oz. "You might do yourself some real damage. Runs in the family, I hear."

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She said it in such a venomous tone that Oz could only stare at her in bewilderment. In return she simply grinned at him malevolently.

“What are you on about?” Oz asked, his brows knitting.

“Come on, you two,” said Heeps from ten yards away. He lifted his eyebrows at Mrs Chambers. “Just look at the two of them gossiping like two old fogeys. What are they like?” His grin was like a wedge of creamy Camembert. “Sure we can’t offer you a coffee? There’s a Costa just around the corner.”

“We’ve got to get back,” said Mrs Chambers, much to Oz’s relief. “Thanks for the offer.”

“Oh dear,” Heeps said with feeling. “Next time then, eh? Come on, Phillipa, let’s hit those shops. That credit card is burning a hole in my pocket and we’ve still to find those boots you wanted.”

“We’ve still to find those boots you wanted,” mimicked Oz in a very uncomplimentary way as they slowly climbed the stairs in the multi-storey a few minutes later.

“Come on, Oz, they’re not that bad.”

“Yes, they are. He’s smarmy and she’s got more clothes than the rest of year eight put together.”

He wanted to tell her about Pheeps’ peculiar taunting, but he had the odd feeling that it was best not to, so he bit his tongue and waited for the inevitable rebuke from his mother. He just couldn’t understand why everyone seemed to think Phillipa Heeps was God’s gift to Seabourne. But to his surprise, Mrs Chambers didn’t scold him. Instead, she took up from where she’d left off outside the estate agent’s.

“The fact is, Oz, Lorenzo might be right. Penwurt is in a prime location and it may be that we’ll have to look at moving sometime. I mean staying there forever might not be an option.”

“Why not? What’s wrong with living at Penwurt forever?”

Mrs Chambers stopped on the stairs and turned her face to Oz. She looked very serious and Oz had the impression that she desperately wanted to say something. Instead, she cupped his chin in her hands and he saw her eyes soften. “Nothing,” she said. “Nothing at all. Come on, let’s go home. It’s way past tea time and I don’t know about you but I am starving.”

After tea Oz gave a great sigh.

“Homework?” asked his mother, wrinkling her nose as she said it.

“Bit of maths.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs Chambers said.

“And King Arthur stuff for English.”

“Gadzooks.” She made a face.

“That one’s sort of cool though. Knights that chop people’s heads off, that kind of thing.”

“Lovely.” Mrs Chambers nodded. “By the way, you have a rather dashing milk moustache.”

“Knew that,” Oz said. “Keeping it for later.”

Mrs Chambers shook her head, ripped off a paper towel and handed it to him silently. Oz proceeded to make his lip milk-free and headed upstairs to his bedroom. The familiar sight of walls plastered with blue and white posters of Seabourne United greeted him. Next to his bed, a desk groaned under the weight of books about spies and wizards and vampires, a secondhand Xbox console he’d bought off eBay with two years’ worth of birthday money and, of course, his dad’s old laptop. Oz threw himself down on the bed.

Ellie, of course, was right. He’d had a whole week in which to get everything done but hadn’t. The question on “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” stared back at him from his exercise book. “Just a couple of paragraphs on your feelings about the poem”

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was how Miss Arkwright had put it. He'd have much preferred a proper title. As it was now, he had no idea where to start.

And then there was maths.

Oz got up determinedly, grabbed his maths books and went up to the library. He plonked himself down at the desk and opened his text book. There were lots of a's and b's and x's and y's and a heading that said "simplifying." Might as well have said "gobbledygook." Oz felt a familiar dark hole open up in his stomach. Why did he find all this stuff so hard? But he knew the answer. It was the same one that Miss Arkwright, his form tutor at Seabourne County School, had been careful to point out to him on his very first day.

"When someone loses as much school as you have over the last couple of years, Oscar, it sometimes takes quite a while to catch up. So, if you need any extra help, just let me know, okay?"

He could see Miss Arkwright in his mind's eye smiling down at him with her well-meaning expression. Up until that point Oz hadn't really thought much about how much school he'd "lost." Mrs Evans at Hurley Street Juniors, where he'd been up until last September, had never said anything. When he stayed away for a week or sometimes two to look after his mother, all she'd ever say when he got back was, "Mum alright, Oz?"

He'd nod and then she'd say, "And are you okay?"

And Oz would nod again and just get on with things.

But he'd lost count of the times that had happened until Miss Arkwright had brought it up. The fact was that it hadn't happened now for almost eight months, but for a long time after Oz's dad had gone it had happened quite a lot. The fact was that when his father died, something had died in his mother as well.

Once, when things were really bad and with Mrs Chambers desperate and miserable, paralysed by grief and confined to her room, Dr Tarpin, the Chambers' family doctor, had sat Oz down

in the kitchen. He'd explained how Mrs Chambers was very sad and how it was quite normal to get a bit depressed after losing someone very close. But he went on to explain that in Oz's mum's case that sadness had turned into an illness that needed treatment with medication. Oz had sat quietly and listened and asked no questions. But when Dr Tarpin had left Oz picked up the sheet of paper upon which the GP had written the big words.

Depression. Reactive unipolar.

The second bit didn't sound too bad when he read it back. In fact, it didn't sound like an illness at all. Unipolar sounded more like something you might use to repair a broken radio. But there was nothing easily fixable about the way his mother wouldn't eat, or didn't want to be hugged, or didn't shower, or slouched about in a dressing gown for days at a time. There was nothing he could buy from an electrical shop to stop her crying for hours on end.

But he had done as much as he could in other ways, like shopping for the two of them at Mr Viridi's greengrocery on Tricolour Street instead of the supermarket in town, and getting eggs and potatoes and bread from the milkman. Sometimes, he'd decide that it was okay to leave her for the few hours of school. Sometimes it didn't seem to matter because she'd ignore him altogether, turned towards the wall in her bed, unable even to respond to his questions.

Sometimes, though, she'd beg him not to leave her. On those days, Oz would do what she couldn't, like the washing and ironing, or Hoovering their kitchen and making spaghetti. And when he got back to Hurley Street School a few days or a week or two later, Mrs Evans seemed simply to understand. He felt a dark cold hand suddenly close around his heart. Although his mother was much, much better, a part of him lived in constant fear of things returning to the way they were. And he had a terrible feeling that Seabourne County would not be as understanding as

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Hurley Street Juniors had been about the Black Dog.

He forced himself to turn to the sheet of twenty questions set by his maths teacher. He'd done almost half of them and now there was nothing for it but to wrestle with the remaining eleven. Whoever thought of algebra should have been hung in a gibbet, like they did to people in Sir Gawain's time. He let his gaze wander to the oak panelling and the strange symbols carved in two great wheels on the oak. He had no real idea what any of them meant other than they were something to do with astrology or astronomy or something beginning with an A. Come to think of it, they were a lot like algebra really. And as was often the case when something in the house caught his attention, he thought of how easy it would all be if his father were there. Had things been different, he could have just nipped downstairs, knocked on the study door and simply asked, "Hey Dad, you know those really weird symbols on the panelling upstairs, what exactly do they mean? And who was the girl that appeared to the bell ringers in the Bunthorpe encounter? Oh, and by the way, you any good at algebra?"

And Michael Chambers would take off his glasses and sit back, regarding Oz with his patient, amused smile. And Oz would listen while his dad explained, whatever the question. And ten minutes would turn into an hour in which books would be taken down from shelves and stories told of trips that his dad had made to strange inaccessible corners of abandoned cities in countries with unpronounceable names.

But things weren't different. They were the way they were and he was in the library at Penwurt, alone on a Sunday with eleven maths questions to finish and an essay to write on Sir Gawain. And all he really wanted to do was to talk to his dad and research ghosts.

Sometimes, life just wasn't fair.

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By RA Jones

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