



The House on Hoarder Hill

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Chicken
House

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For Rufus and Xavier – K. N.

*For Adrian, Aleks, Thorley, Josie,
Annika and Ryan – M. L.*

‘And above all, watch with glittering eyes
the whole world around you because the
greatest secrets are always hidden in the
most unlikely places. Those who don’t
believe in magic will never find it.’

ROALD DAHL



PROLOGUE

The stone raven dreamt of flying. She dreamt of rising on currents of warm air and chasing other smaller birds, of swooping into the woods, hungry for a catch. But this pleasant dream was interrupted by a voice.

‘Help them,’ it said, ‘help them find their way.’ It was the voice of the Missing One. The Missing One was never seen, but the raven had heard the voice before. It belonged to the Great House somehow.

Help who? And how? the raven thought back. What can I do, stuck here on the roof? I can only dream of flying, after all.

And then she felt it. Freedom, the glorious freedom to move. It began with a tingle at the top of her small

head, and spread as though poured like water over her carved body. White stone turned to feather, muscle, a beating heart and darting eyes. The raven shook her wings out in delight, then launched into the air, no longer dreaming but truly in flight. She arced high above the Great House in joyful loops, ignoring the envious calls of the stone gargoyles and dragon grotesques still fixed to the roofline.

‘Please. Find them, and lead them here,’ said the voice of the Missing One.

‘Who?’ asked the raven, surveying the land beneath her.

The Missing One showed the raven a vision of a flock of humans in a red car – a girl, a boy, a woman and a man.

‘Family,’ whispered the Missing One.

The raven set off to find them.



CHAPTER 1

THEY'RE JUST TRICKS

A ball of gloom was growing in Hedy van Beer's chest as she stared out of the car window at the snow-covered fields. With every mile, she was closer to what was sure to be the most boring two weeks ever.

It was so unfair of her parents – both archaeologists – to go on a dig in Spain without them. Well, perhaps it was sensible to leave Spencer behind; he was only eight. But Hedy was eleven, a Guide, and had already learnt a few Spanish phrases from a language app.

'Will you come back early if there's an emergency?' she asked.

‘What kind of emergency?’ asked Dad. He was in the middle of choosing another song for the stereo while Mum was driving.

‘Say, if Spencer’s finger is cut off?’

Spencer looked up from his book of magic tricks. ‘Grandpa John’s a magician. He’d be able to stick it back on with magic.’

Hedy shook her head. ‘You’re so gullible.’

‘What does “gullible” mean?’

‘It means you believe anything. Anyway, he’s not a magician any more, so don’t expect anything interesting.’ Hedy leant forwards until her face was between the front seats. ‘So *would* you come back early if Spencer’s finger got cut off? Since magic isn’t real?’

‘Depends which finger,’ said Dad.

Mum smothered a laugh. ‘Of course we would.’ She reached back to pat Hedy’s cheek. ‘But try not to create any emergencies, OK? This trip is very important to Dad and me. It could mean a lot of new work for us. Then I promise: you, me, Spence and Dad on other trips.’

Other trips. As the fields and trees and hills whizzed by, Hedy put her headphones on, cuddled into her mum’s stripy scarf and imagined herself in Egypt,

gazing up at the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx. But out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Dad glancing at her to see if she was listening to them. When he turned back around, she hit 'pause' on her music, suspecting he might be about to say something interesting.

'They'll be OK with him, won't they?' Dad was asking softly.

'Of course,' Mum said. 'He may be preoccupied and . . . *funny* about his things, but he wouldn't let any harm come to them.'

'Isn't this the time of year your mother . . . ?' Dad trailed off with a sympathetic look.

Mum sighed. 'It'll be good for him to have some company here. He never stays long when he visits us.'

At long last, their little red car stopped in the centre of Marberry's Rest. It was a sleepy, higgledy-piggledy village, dotted with only a few small shops. Although it had the feel of a place that never changed, Hedy's family were confused by the five-way junction at its centre every single time.

'Why can I never remember the street?' Mum muttered.

'Give me a second,' Dad said, as he tried to get the map working on his phone.

Spencer had exhausted his pocket's usual stockpile of lollies and started munching the last of his cheese sandwiches, as though he thought they would be there for a while.

Hedy spotted a large white bird circling overhead. Now it came flapping towards them.

'Is that a white . . . raven?' she breathed.

Closer and closer it flew, until, to everyone's shock, it landed on the bonnet of the car.

It was enormous, even bigger than the ones Hedy had seen at the Tower of London. It tilted its head to the side as though sizing them up, then cawed. With a lazy flap, it took off down one of the narrow streets. They all stared; Mum seemed frozen to her seat, too surprised to move. The raven circled back, and landed on the bonnet of the car again. It hopped close to the windscreen and gave Mum a stern look, then propelled itself down the same narrow street once more.

Hedy had a funny, thrilled feeling where her ball of gloom had been. 'It's like it wants us to follow it,' she said.

'I don't know about that,' Mum said, 'but I think it's the right street.' She put the car in gear, and they

followed the raven all the way to Grandpa John's house.

Although they hadn't visited in a long while, the house was exactly as Hedy remembered: three floors of pale stone with a dark roof rising steeply into the sky. On the roof were carved stone creatures and a short tower, which Mum said was called a belvedere and was built to show off the view, but which Hedy thought of as a turret from which you could watch the enemy approach. Nestled deep in the shadowy porch was the black front door. The garden, behind a wrought-iron fence, was strewn with leaves and snow. There was none of the hustle and bustle of their own home, or the homes of Hedy's friends, but it wasn't unfriendly, exactly. It was more like Grandpa John's house was taking a long time to think before it started speaking.

The white raven that had led them here – Hedy was sure it *had* been leading them – flew up to the roof and settled up there amongst the other small statues that were more fantastical, like dragons and gryphons.

Hedy gave Spencer a nudge and pointed. At one of the windows on the top floor stood Grandpa John, his white hair sticking up in untidy crests. His face

crinkled into a smile and he stepped back from the window, disappearing from sight. And the very next moment, faster than anyone could cover the distance, he was opening the heavy front door. Spencer's mouth popped open and Hedy blinked in surprise.

Grandpa John smoothed his hand down his shirt buttons and then did a nimble turn, all the way around to face them again. To their astonishment, he was now wearing a brightly coloured tie.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he called in his deep, warm voice, 'welcome.'

The children crowded around Grandpa John to give him a hug. He smelt of peppermints and pipe smoke, as always. Hedy secretly measured how tall she was, pleased to find she was now up to Grandpa's third shirt button.

'Grandpa,' Spencer burst out immediately, 'if I've got a finger that's cut off, can you stick it back on with magic?'

Grandpa John lifted Spencer's hands to his face to study them. 'All of your fingers appear to be attached. Why do you ask?'

'Hedy doesn't believe in magic,' said Spencer.

'Well,' he replied, 'one might say that magic is a very

sensible thing *not* to believe in.’

Hedy was surprised; Grandpa John used to be a very famous magician.

Grandpa John regarded Hedy for a long moment then, as though wanting to say something but not able to find the words.

‘She looks like Mum, doesn’t she?’ Mum said, stepping up to join them. There was an awkward moment when neither she nor Grandpa John were sure which cheek to kiss, or whether to simply hug.

Grandpa John cleared his throat. ‘More than ever.’

They were speaking of Hedy and Spencer’s grandmother, Rose, which hardly ever happened. She had disappeared when Hedy’s mum was still a young child. Looking like Grandma Rose gave Hedy a small glow of satisfaction until she realized that Grandpa John’s eyes were shiny with tears. It made him miss her, Hedy thought. But before she could decide what to say next, Dad stacked the last of the bags and came to greet Grandpa John with a handshake. The moment to ask questions disappeared.

The hallway seemed unchanged since their last visit three years ago. One wall was lined with sculpted

heads and carved statues. On the opposite wall, over a hall table, hung two large paintings in gold frames. Hedy placed her new-old phone (a hand-me-down from Dad, which he'd given her to use while they were away) on the edge of the table.

Each painting was a portrait of a person with a human body but the head of an animal: one was a skunk and the other a magpie. They were dressed in really old-fashioned clothes and had strange collections of items: jewellery, gloves, fruit, a small knife. Curiously, there were also modern objects in the paintings: a Rubik's cube, a set of keys and a CD of some band called The Smiths.

'Look, my team!' Spencer said, pointing to a West Ham beanie painted in the corner. He snapped a photo with the Polaroid camera he'd taken almost everywhere since his birthday.

'I hope you kids don't mind sharing,' Grandpa John was saying. 'I'm afraid I haven't had time to clear out more than one bedroom.'

That got their attention. Hedy had a sinking feeling that this holiday was about to go from boring to downright annoying. 'But I have my own room at home,' she said hopefully.

‘What’s wrong with sharing a room with me?’ huffed Spencer.

Hedy rolled her eyes. ‘You smell like a monkey’s bum.’

‘That means you go around smelling monkey bums!’ Spencer cackled.

‘Hey!’ Mum waggled a finger. ‘No fighting. You’re sharing. And if you don’t share nicely, you’ll go on sharing when we get back home. Now let’s get these bags up to your room.’

With a sigh, Hedy picked up the phone – and frowned. It was now at the back of the table, leaning against the painting of the skunk, the earphones almost stuck to the painting. Had Spencer just moved it?

‘Come on, Hedy,’ called Dad from the stairs. ‘Don’t forget to bring your pillow.’

Hedy checked her earphones for paint and found nothing, so she grabbed her things and scrambled after the others.

‘Why are the doors all different colours?’ Spencer asked Grandpa John as he led the way up the stairs.

‘This was a bed and breakfast once upon a time,’ Grandpa John said. ‘Perhaps it helped guests remember which room they were in.’

Their bedroom had a door that was a faded mauve colour. Two beds were already made up inside, and even though it felt very still, there was a fresh smell of lavender in the air.

On the walls hung framed maps of all the continents, and plates painted with famous ancient structures from around the world, like the Pyramids of Giza and the Great Wall of China. At the foot of each bed were large trunks, each one big enough for the children to hide in.

Spencer bolted to the bed closest to the window. ‘This one’s mine!’

‘I’m going to the kitchen to make some tea with Grandpa,’ Mum said. ‘You guys come down when you’ve put some of your things away, OK?’

‘But don’t touch anything on your way down,’ said Grandpa. ‘There are things here that are locked away for good reason. Do you understand?’

Although they had heard it umpteen times on their way here, there was a note of warning in Grandpa John’s voice that stilled the children. They nodded. ‘Yes, Grandpa.’

To unpack, Spencer stood inside his trunk and turned his bag upside down so that all his things fell in

around him. His bag wasn't quite empty, though, and when he lifted it up for a final shake a sock full of marbles fell on his head. Hedy shook her head at her brother's messy ways. 'Doesn't Grandpa have like six bedrooms here?' she asked. 'Why can't I have my own room?'

'Grandpa's collected a lot of things over the years,' Dad said, studying a battleship in a bottle. 'The other rooms are probably full of stuff.'

Spencer's eyes lit up. 'Does he collect stuff for his magic?'

'They're just tricks, Spence,' said Hedy, 'not real magic.'

'He doesn't do much magician stuff any more, Spencer,' Dad said.

'Not since Grandma disappeared,' added Hedy.

Dad was startled. 'How did you know that?'

'I heard you and Mum talking about it once.' Her grandmother was so rarely brought up that Hedy listened keenly for any mention of her, even if she wasn't supposed to hear.

'What's magic got to do with Grandma?' asked Spencer.

Dad heaved a sigh. 'I don't know, Spence,' he said,

although Hedy thought he knew more than he was saying. ‘Come on. You’ve got a couple of weeks to ask him all these questions. I bet there’ll be a few interesting stories for you to hear.’

The kitchen had a feeling of order that was different from the clutter of the rest of the house, as though someone else was in charge here. It was well scrubbed and airy, with windows overlooking the frosty back garden and another door that led to the laundry. Grandpa John was at the oak table with his cup of tea, rolling a couple of small steel balls through his fingers. Up, over and around they moved, as though they were dancing. Spencer hurried to Grandpa’s side in awe, eyes fixed on the steel balls. They flashed in the light, chasing each other around Grandpa John’s wrists and palms and then, suddenly, they were gone. Mum and Dad clapped. Grandpa John smiled at Spencer over his teacup.

‘*You* said he doesn’t do magic any more!’ Spencer said to Hedy triumphantly.

‘That wasn’t magic,’ said Hedy, ‘it was knowing how to do cool stuff with your hands. Wasn’t it, Grandpa?’

‘Indeed,’ said Grandpa John. ‘No magic performed in this house. Strictly tricks only.’ He seemed to be

reminding himself of a rule that mustn't be broken.

Over thick wedges of lemon cake, Mum took Grandpa John through a page of instructions about Spencer's asthma, urged the children to wrap up, and reminded them for the hundred-and-first time not to touch Grandpa John's things.

And then it was time for their parents to go. All of a sudden, the gloom ball sat right on top of Hedy's heart again. They hugged goodbye on the porch, and when Spencer and Mum started sniffing, Hedy found herself getting teary too. Even Dad looked a little red around the eyes. 'Look after Spence,' he whispered into Hedy's hair, 'and we'll see you on Christmas Eve.'

'I will.' Hedy saw their mum whisper something to Spencer that made him glance at Hedy, nod and put on a brave smile.

The little red car coughed to life, and their parents' arms waved out of the windows until they turned the corner and were out of sight.

'What did Mum say to you?' Hedy asked Spencer.

'That I have to look after you,' Spencer said, pulling on the furry aviator cap their dad had given him before leaving. He reached out to take Grandpa John's hand. 'And we *both* have to look after Grandpa.'