

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RUSKIN shivered so violently he nearly dropped his cup.

'Are you cold, my dear boy?' asked Corky.

'No. I just . . .'

'More tea?' asked Corky.

'No,' Ruskin said.

'Are you ill?'

'Just finish your story!' cried Ruskin, in the closest his squeaky whisper of a voice could get to a shout. 'Tell me about Krindlekrax!'

Corky took a deep breath.

'One day,' Corky said, 'I was underground, when I heard a noise. A noise like I'd never heard before. A sort of crying sound. "Eeeek!" went the noise. I looked all around. My torch beam cut

through the darkness. And there . . . there – on a ledge beside the trickling water – I saw something move. It was about the size of a shoe and bright green and had tiny sharp teeth. It was eating a slice of toast.'

'What was it?' Ruskin asked, staring at Corky and clutching the edge of his seat.

'A baby crocodile, my dear boy,' Corky replied. 'But how did it get there?'

'I never found that out. But there it was. Bright green and munching toast. There was marmalade on the toast and orange rind was stuck between the crocodile's teeth. There was something . . . oh, so enticing about the tiny creature. I wanted to touch it. So I stepped forward. My feet went splash in the water and the light from my torch shone in the animal's eyes, making them bright red.'

'Were you scared?' Ruskin asked.

'No, my dear boy. I just wanted to get closer to the crocodile, to feel its skin.' Corky licked a chocolate biscuit for a while, then continued, 'Slowly, I reached out . . . I could feel the crocodile's warm breath on my fingertips. And then, suddenly, the crocodile snapped its jaws shut. I managed to get my finger out of the way just in time. "Clack!"

went the jaws. Like two bits of metal clanging together. I took a step back, slipped and fell into the water. The water went up my nose and into my ears and made me cough and splutter. But I didn't have time to cough and splutter for long.'

'Why, Corky?' Ruskin asked.

'Because the crocodile was already chasing after me,' Corky replied. 'I ran down the tunnel. The crocodile was very fast. I could hear its cracking jaws and the swish of its tail. I ran through the dirty water, hardly looking where I was going. I started to panic. For a moment I thought I was lost and would never find the ladder that led up to the surface again. "Help!" I called. "Help me, someone!"

'My voice echoed all around me. But no help came. No one could hear me. I was underground, my dear boy, and no living thing could hear me. Except ...'

'The crocodile!' Ruskin interrupted.

'Exactly,' Corky said. 'Except the crocodile. But - suddenly - I saw the ladder. I grabbed it and started to climb. I was halfway up when I felt a terrible pain in my knee.' Corky touched his leg, the one with the limp. 'I looked down and saw the crocodile biting my knee. I shook my leg frantically. But the crocodile wouldn't let go. Its

tiny jaws were clenched tight. Deeper and deeper its teeth went into my skin. I was yelling out. Finally, I hit the crocodile as hard as I could. It let go and fell back into the watery darkness. I heard it go splash.'

Corky poured himself another cup of tea.

'Thirsty work,' Corky remarked, 'all this storytelling.'

'So that's how you got your limp,' Ruskin said.

'Exactly, my dear boy,' Corky said. 'I went to hospital and a doctor put a bandage round my knee and told me I'd be all right. But I wasn't! The crocodile had bitten through a tendon or something and I had to use a walking stick.' Corky picked up the packet of biscuits and looked inside. 'Only one left,' he said. 'Do you want it, my dear boy?'

'No, you can have it,' Ruskin replied.

'You sure? I wouldn't want to cheat you of your share of the delicious chocolate.'

'I'm sure, Corky! Just tell me . . . you being chased by the baby crocodile – is that why you left your job in the sewers and became a caretaker instead?'

'In a way,' Corky replied, licking the biscuit, 'but . . . well, there's still more to tell!'

'Oh, what, Corky? What?'