

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE VOICE belonged to Mr Flick.

Mr Flick was the manager of the Lizard Street cinema, known as Flick's Ritz. He wore a black suit with velvet lapels, black bow tie, shiny leather shoes and a green waistcoat with big brass buttons.

Mr Flick was just opening the cinema. Outside were photographs of the forthcoming film: men on horseback, holding shields and lances.

'Looks very exciting,' Corky said. 'Who wrote it?'

Mr Flick looked around – to make sure Mr Lace wasn't nearby – before replying, 'Shakespeare.'

'I love Shakespeare,' Ruskin cried. 'One day I'm going to be the greatest actor in the world. I'm

going to stand on stage and do exciting things and the audience will watch me, holding their breath and biting their nails.'

'You wanted to play the part of the hero in the school play, didn't you?' asked Mr Flick.

'Yes,' Ruskin replied, looking at the cracked pavement, 'but I didn't get it.'

'Who got it then?' asked Mr Flick.

'Elvis,' Ruskin told him. 'The class thought he looked more like a hero because he's tall and got muscles.'

'Oh, things like that don't matter to an actor,' Mr Flick said. 'I've seen some plays and thought the actors were as tall as a lamp post, but when I've seen them in real life, they've been shorter than me. It's what a person *does* that makes him tall, it has nothing to do with height or muscles.'

Corky smiled and said, 'Exactly, Mr Flick.' Then he looked at Ruskin. 'Come on, my dear boy. Time for our tea and biscuits.'

'Can we see the film some time?' asked Ruskin.

'Of course,' Corky said. 'I'd enjoy that very much.'



CHAPTER TWELVE

CORKY lived next to the cinema. His home was small and dark and smelt of furniture polish and chocolate. Corky loved eating chocolate, especially the chocolate from chocolate biscuits.

Once they were inside, Corky put the kettle on. Ruskin sat at the table.

'The trouble is,' Ruskin said, 'I bet the whole of Lizard Street thinks Elvis will make a better hero than I would. I bet Mr and Mrs Cave think that, and Mrs Walnut, and Mr Lace, and Dr Flowers, even though Elvis breaks all their windows and they don't really like him.'

Corky opened the chocolate biscuits and handed one to Ruskin.

'What does it matter what they think, my dear boy?' he said. 'You know you could be a hero. That's all that matters.'

'I know,' Ruskin said, thoughtfully munching a biscuit. 'But sometimes it's nice when other people think what you think.'

The kettle boiled and Corky filled the teapot with hot water. He waited for it to brew, then poured two cups of tea and brought them to the table.

'I was called a hero once, you know,' Corky said.

'You?' Ruskin said. 'When?'

'Oh, years ago, my dear boy,' Corky replied. 'When I was your age.'

'What did you do?'

'It doesn't matter now,' Corky said. 'But I was given this ...'

Corky went over to a cupboard and opened a drawer. As he did so, his face glowed with a golden light as if the drawer contained a light bulb. Corky took something from the drawer, held it tightly in his fist, and the golden light disappeared.

He returned to the table and put something in Ruskin's hands.

The golden light returned.

It was a medal. A sparkling gold medal.

'You really *are* a hero!' Ruskin exclaimed.

'That's what everyone told me, my dear boy,' Corky said. 'But I never felt like it. I mean, what does a medal mean? Nothing. To be quite honest, I feel more of a hero sweeping the school playground.'

'In that case,' Ruskin said, 'I'm a hero as well. After all, I help you sweep the playground sometimes.'

'Exactly, my dear boy,' Corky said. 'That's why I'm giving it to you.'

'Giving me what?'

'The medal.'

'Oh . . . but . . . you can't!' Ruskin exclaimed. 'It belongs to you.'

'If it belongs to me, I can do what I like with it. And I'd like to give it to you.'

Ruskin stared at the medal.

It was so bright and beautiful it made his eyes sting.

'And besides,' Corky continued, 'you deserve a medal for putting up with me. I'm so glad we're friends, my dear boy. I was lonely before I met you. Do you remember the first day we met?'

'I was nine years old,' Ruskin said. 'You'd just become school caretaker.'

'That's right,' Corky said, smiling. 'You used to go everywhere with Elvis and Sparkey then. The three of you were inseparable.'

'We were all the same height then,' Ruskin said. 'All three of us were small and we were the best of friends. We did everything together. We'd ride our bikes and talk about insects and jump over



cracks in the pavement. We used to watch you sweeping the school playground. Elvis rushed up to you and asked what subject you taught.'

'Oh yes . . . I remember.'

'Elvis thought you were a teacher.'

'Me a teacher!' Corky chuckled to himself. 'Can you imagine it? I don't even know the capital of Australia.'

'And I began talking to you more and more,' Ruskin said. 'It was you who got me interested in acting. You told me about all the plays you'd seen and how some actors made you laugh and cry. And, one day, Mr Lace overheard us talking and you said -'

'Shakespeare!' interrupted Corky.

'That's right,' Ruskin said. 'You said "Shakespeare" and Mr Lace started to cry. That's when I discovered "Shakespearling Mr Lace".'

'And you told Elvis,' Corky said, frowning.

'He was my friend then,' Ruskin explained. 'I trusted him, Corky. I thought I could tell him everything. But it all changed.'

'Because he started to grow?'

'It seems that way. You gave me a football. Remember that, Corky?'

'Yes, my dear boy,' Corky replied.

‘It went “Da-boinggg!” when I bounced it. Elvis was really jealous. And then . . . well, he just started to grow. He grew muscles, got bigger and started to wear those padded shoulders and a helmet.’

‘And he stole your ball.’

‘That’s right. And Sparkey – who used to be my friend – stopped talking to me and started following Elvis around everywhere, saying “Yes, Sir” to everything Elvis said. And now I’ve got no friends. Except you, Corky.’

‘And I’ve got no friends. Except you, Ruskin.’

They hugged each other.

Corky’s hair was very soft against Ruskin’s cheek, like feathers, and Ruskin could feel the old man’s heart beating through his clothes.

Suddenly Ruskin exclaimed, ‘But the cracks, Corky! The cracks and the dark bricks and the holes and bumps in the road. You were going to tell me what caused them.’

‘So I was, my dear boy,’ Corky said softly.

There was a pause.

‘Go on then,’ Ruskin urged.

Corky took a biscuit and started to lick the chocolate.

‘It’s quite a story,’ Corky said. ‘More strange than Elvis growing into the window-smasher of

Philip Ridley

Lizard Street. It's a story so strange, you might not believe it.'

'I *will* believe it,' Ruskin said. 'Tell me.'

'Well,' Corky said, 'you know when you sometimes feel a rumbling in the ground under Lizard Street? And people tell you it's a tube train going by beneath?'

'Yes,' Ruskin said.

'Well, it's not a tube train,' Corky said. 'It's the thing that lives in the sewers. It's the thing that comes up through the largest drain in the street. It comes up at night, when we're asleep, and cracks pavements with its gigantic tail, scorching bricks with its fiery breath and digging holes in roads with its sharp claws.'

'What is it?' Ruskin asked breathlessly.

'Krindlekrax,' Corky replied.