CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WINSTON got dressed and went to the zoo. When he told them about the missing crocodile they instructed him to go and never come back. He would never be allowed to look after animals again.

Winston went home and put his uniform in a suitcase under his bed, then he sat at the kitchen table in his pyjama bottoms and a white vest and said, 'I want some toast.'

Wendy said, 'Why don't you go out? I thought you said you had a friend.'

'I was wrong,' Winston said. 'It's too dangerous having a friend. I shouldn't have interfered. I'm not going to interfere with anything from now on.'

A few days later Wendy gave birth to a son.

'What shall we call him?' Wendy asked Winston.

'I don't mind,' he replied.

'But you must have a preference?'

'I don't want to interfere,' he said.

'Then I'll call him . . . Ruskin,' Wendy said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

AFTER he'd finished telling his story, Winston fell asleep.

Ruskin stared at his dad. He looked at the wrinkles round his eyes and the grey hairs already appearing in his thinning hair. He looked at the dirt beneath his dad's fingernails and the holes in the white vest. He looked at how small his dad was – how thin his arms were, how knobbly his knees – and, the more he looked, the harder he found it to believe that this man was responsible for Krindlekrax.

The ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece sounded very loud.

Ruskin glanced at the clock.

It was just gone midnight.

Way past Ruskin's bedtime.

Ruskin helped his dad to his feet, took him upstairs and put him to bed.

Once Ruskin was in his own room, he looked out of the window down the length of Lizard Street.

He looked at Corky's house.

How could he talk to Corky again? How could he be friends with Corky when his own dad – Winston Splinter – had been responsible for Corky's white hair and limp?

At the end of the street the pub sign swung in the breeze.

Ruskin peered at the sign. Yes, now he could see. It wasn't a dragon with a penny in its mouth at all. It was a crocodile. A baby crocodile. The baby crocodile that had been taken from the zoo and escaped to the sewers.

Eeeek! went the sign.

To Ruskin it sounded like the most terrible noise in the world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE NEXT morning, Winston couldn't remember a thing about what he'd said the night before. And Ruskin didn't tell him. All he said was that he'd found his dad asleep and had put him to bed.

Wendy, Winston and Ruskin sat at the kitchen table eating their breakfast toast and drinking their breakfast tea.

'Polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day,' Wendy said. 'I don't know how you can fall asleep in that chair.'

'You say that every time,' Winston said.

'Well, it's true,' said Wendy. 'All the legs are wobbly and it creaks when you move about.'

Ruskin asked, 'Why don't we get a new one then?'

'Because we can't afford a new one,' Winston said. 'Why are you always wanting things?'

'I'm not always wanting things,' Ruskin said.

'Yes you are,' Winston persisted. 'Give me this, give me that. It's not my fault I haven't got as much money as Elvis Cave's mum and dad. It's not my fault I haven't got a pub with a stained-wood bar and satin cushions and a carpet with red roses on.'

As Winston spoke, he sprayed Ruskin's face with bits of toast and marmalade.

'Calm down,' Ruskin said.

'Don't tell me to calm down,' Winston continued. 'It's not my fault I can't afford to put new windows in and we have to stare at old newspaper instead.'

A bit of toast went into Wendy's eye.

'Ouch!' went Wendy. Then she said, 'Oh, polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day, do shut up, Winston. Otherwise I'll have to have a bath to wash away all the bits of toast you're spraying everywhere.'

But Winston just kept on talking.

'It's not my fault I have to wear these mouldy pyjama bottoms and a vest with holes in. It's not my fault I haven't got any friends and I watch telly all night. It's not my fault I haven't got a job and have to look after toy animals instead of real ones.'

Bits of toast and marmalade were flying everywhere now. They stuck to the ceiling and stuck to the walls.

'My kitchen's a mess!' Wendy cried. 'Stop moaning, otherwise everything will be covered with toast and marmalade.'

But Winston wouldn't stop.

'It's not my fault we've got the biggest drain in front of our house and it goes "Ka-clunk!". It's not my fault Elvis's ball goes "Da-boinggg!" and smashes everyone's windows. It's not my fault we live on a street with dark bricks and cracked pavements and a road that's got holes in it. It's not my fault I'm short and thin with balding hair and my voice is a squeaky whisper and I need glasses with lenses so thick my eyes look like saucers. It's not my fault! It's not! It's not! It's not!'

And with that, Winston went upstairs to stroke his fluffy animals.

Wendy looked around at the toast-and-marmalade-splattered kitchen.

'What a mess,' Wendy said.

Ruskin got up.

'I'm going to school,' he said.

'Why don't you go up and talk to your dad?' Wendy said. 'He's upset.'

'I don't want to,' Ruskin said, leaving the house.

As Ruskin walked down Lizard Street, he stared at Corky's house.

I'll never be able to go there again, Ruskin thought. How can I? I can't face Corky now I know . . . what my dad did.

But, even as he thought that, he was already missing Corky.

When Ruskin entered the school playground, he saw Corky mending the window that Elvis's ball had smashed the day before.

'Good morning, my dear boy,' Corky called, waving.

But Ruskin didn't wave back.

Instead he ran into his classroom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THAT DAY, Mr Lace continued rehearsing *Young Hal Oaktree.*

Elvis was still having trouble with his lines.

'You scary thing of . . . of . . .' Elvis said, then his voice trailed away.

'The dark,' prompted Mr Lace from behind the piano.

'The dark!' Elvis exclaimed, holding his plastic sword a little higher and staring at the cardboard dragon. 'You will scare us no more. I am not . . . not . . .' Elvis forgot his lines again.

'Afraid,' prompted Mr Lace.

'Afraid!' Elvis exclaimed. 'I am not afraid. I have . . . have . . .'

'Tamed you,' prompted Mr Lace, putting another pencil in his mouth (making three in all).

'Tamed you and now I am your . . . your . . .'

'Master.'

'Master!' said Elvis. But he was obviously fed up with the rehearsal because he had put down his sword and shield and had started bouncing his football.

Da-boinggg!

Da-boinggg!

Mr Lace said, 'Really, Elvis, you must learn your lines.'

'Oh, I will,' said Elvis casually.

'I'm *serious*,' said Mr Lace, putting another pencil in his mouth (making four in all) and waving his hands in the air.

'When I've learned my lines,' Elvis said, 'I'll be the best actor in the world.' And he glared at Ruskin, waiting for him to contradict this.

But Ruskin had his mind on other things, so he just stared at Elvis in silence.

CHAPTER THIRTY

AFTER school Ruskin rushed out of the classroom to avoid Elvis (who still wanted to 'get him'), and ran across the playground to avoid Corky.

But Corky was at the main gate, already sweeping the playground, and it was impossible for Ruskin to get out without passing him.

'Hello, my dear boy,' Corky said, putting his hand on Ruskin's shoulder. 'Going to help me clean the playground?'

Ruskin stood still and stared at his feet.

'No,' Ruskin said softly.

'Oh!' Corky said. 'Why not?'

'No reason.'

'Have I done something to upset you?'

'No. Not you.'

'Then who? Has Elvis been picking on you again?'

'It's not Elvis,' Ruskin said, still staring at his feet.

'Look at me, my dear boy,' Corky said.

Ruskin looked at Corky.

'Tell me what's wrong,' Corky said.

'We can't be friends any more,' Ruskin told him.

'Why?' asked Corky.

'I . . . I . . . I can't tell you,' Ruskin said. 'Please don't make me.'

Ruskin ran out of the playground and down Lizard Street as fast as he could.

'Ruskin!' Corky called after him. 'Ruskin! Come back!'

But Ruskin didn't go back. He just kept on running; past Mr and Mrs Cave's pub, past Mrs Walnut's shop, past Mr Flick's cinema, past Mr Lace's house with its window boxes full of marigolds and past Dr Flowers's house, where the doctor could be heard sneezing, 'TISHOO! TISHOO! TISHOO!'