

THE  
STOLEN  
CITY



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PICCADILLY PRESS • LONDON

## CHAPTER ONE

# *SMALL THINGS*

It happened on the first day of the summer holidays.

Bethany Chase and her parents had started their day expecting a scenic train journey down to London in pleasant sunshine. It wasn't long, though, before they were dealing with delays, disruptions, overcrowded carriages and numerous queues. The weather became unbearably hot and stifling. And now they had arrived, Mr Chase insisted that they see the sights of London by taking a bus to Aunt Bess's house, even though Bethany and her mother were weighed down with an assortment of heavy bags that seemed to encourage almost everyone to barge into them. It didn't help that it was late afternoon and the bus was full of miserable-looking people returning home from work, or that Bethany

and her parents had to stand up for the entire journey, barely able to glimpse the landmarks Mr Chase excitedly called out as they made their way through the city centre.

‘Look, in the distance – Big Ben!’ he said in an overly keen voice. ‘Always looks smaller in real life, doesn’t it? And the Houses of Parliament. Guy Fawkes tried to blow that up, you know.’

Bethany tried to smile with interest but deliberately edged away from her father, wondering if there were some slightly less embarrassing adults she could pretend were her parents for the duration of the trip. Her father couldn’t have looked more like a tourist, having decided to wear a disastrous combination of brightly coloured shorts, stripy shirt and sunglasses. Her mother, meanwhile, had spent most of the day rummaging through her bags, double checking tickets and maps, and generally fussing over Bethany and Mr Chase. She was doing this now in a very loud, noticeable manner. After a short pause she thrust a bottle of water at her daughter. ‘Drink? You need to keep hydrated, you know. How about a snack? I have crisps or fruit.’

‘I’m fine,’ Bethany replied sullenly, focusing all her attention on the book she had been trying to lose herself in for most of the day.

‘I think that’s Nelson’s Column!’ her father blurted out, rudely jabbing a finger at the window and nearly catching a passenger on the cheek.

‘Dad,’ Bethany hissed.

He barely noticed her embarrassment or the attention he was attracting from the other passengers as they peeked disapprovingly over their newspapers at him. At each stop, people surged on and off the bus so quickly that Bethany was jostled to and fro, narrowly avoiding being pushed over altogether.

‘Well, this is nice,’ her mother chirped pleasantly. ‘It’s like one of those bus tours.’

‘Hmm, sort of,’ Bethany replied, less enthusiastically. ‘But one where you can’t see anything or get a seat.’

‘Cheeky.’ Mrs Chase laughed, ruffling her daughter’s hair.

Bethany had not wanted to leave Stagtree Knoll for the summer holidays. Whereas once she would have relished visiting a new city, now the idea filled her with dread, especially somewhere with so many old buildings. Bethany didn’t like old buildings and avoided them at all costs.

It had been her parents’ idea to come to London. They had decided to rent their house out as a holiday home and stay with Mr Chase’s sister, Aunt Bess, for most of the summer. They made it sound as though it was exciting and adventurous, but Bethany knew the real reason. She had heard her parents talking one night when they’d thought she’d gone to bed, discussing the factory where her father worked, how the contracts were drying up, how there were rumours of closures, how he never had enough hours. She had overheard his plans to look for new jobs in London, with the possibility that they might move there. It made her anxious. She had only just got used to living in Stagtree

Knoll and didn't think she could deal with all the upheaval of moving somewhere new.

Bethany knew that wasn't the real reason she was feeling so tense today, though. She couldn't avoid the memories of last summer and the strange adventure she'd experienced. Or at least *thought* she'd experienced. After all, what she recollected was, by most people's standards, unbelievable. Who would believe that she had stepped over into the spirit realm and found herself trapped in a hotel for ghosts, spirits and non-material beings? Who would believe she had helped a giant trapped in a pit, or that she had met the ghosts of conjoined twins working as cleaning ladies, or made friends with a mischievous pooka? And who would believe that she had defeated the Jackomuss demon, a demon that threatened to destroy her parents and enslave many others under its sinister influence?

No one, that was who. That was why Bethany never talked about what had happened. That was why in the year that had followed those peculiar events she had become quiet and cautious. She worried what other people might think about her, or that they would laugh at her, and so she kept a distance between herself and other children, trying her best to forget. At school, she avoided making friends, instead concentrating on her schoolwork and losing herself in books. She became particularly interested in the supernatural and would read up on all sorts of paranormal events and folklores and myths, hoping to find clues that would either confirm or deny her own experiences. And

when the other children at school had joked about her being boring, so what? Bethany had enjoyed enough excitement for one lifetime, thank you very much. She had fought a demon and survived. Now all she wanted was a quiet life.

Her mind filled with those thoughts now. She had done a good job of letting them fade from her memory in recent months, but something – the summer weather, the travelling – was causing them to stir again. She found herself picturing the Spellbound Hotel, running along its corridors in fear, her friend at her side. The image of Quinn popped into her head and it made her smile. She could see his wide and round face, his impossibly large grin and his quiff of pink hair . . .

And that was when it happened.

Bethany idly glanced out of the window of the bus as it came to a halt behind a long line of traffic and saw a face staring back at her. It was a very peculiar face, wide and round, with an impossibly large grin, a quiff of pink hair, a small lumpy nose and eyes that glinted with mischief.

‘Quinn?’ Bethany called out. A mixture of feelings welled up in her in that single moment: shock, happiness, disbelief. She uttered a startled noise somewhere between a laugh and a shriek, and stumbled backwards. A hand caught her and stopped her from tripping over entirely. Her book fell to the floor.

*No, it can't be!*

She was standing at the centre of a throng of adults, all

frowning at her. Someone handed her the book she had dropped. Bethany thanked them, then looked out of the window again, but Quinn's face had disappeared. In its place stood a bored-looking office worker leafing through a magazine as he waited for the lights to change. The bus pulled away.

*It's hot*, Bethany decided, *that's all*. Her head spun a little and she eagerly grabbed the water her mother offered to her a second time.

'Did you just call out to someone?' Mrs Chase asked, squinting out of the window.

'No, no. Just daydreaming,' Bethany said quickly. *Stupid*, she chided herself. *It couldn't have been Quinn, that would be impossible. It would mean . . .* But she didn't want to think about what that would mean. She didn't want to think about it at all.

The bus chugged on towards Hyde Park, with Mr Chase commenting loudly on Marble Arch. Bethany tried to concentrate on what he was saying but her mind teemed with all sorts of buried memories, wonderful and alarming, that were springing to the surface. There was the group of leprechauns that had infested the hotel, and the bizarre library of singing tongues, and the demon. She shivered as she pictured it. It was a foul thing that resembled a black flame, flickering, unnatural.

*Pull yourself together*, she told herself. *You have not just seen a spirit of mischief in central London*.

As the bus passed out of the city centre, Mr Chase ran out of historic sights to comment on and became gradually quieter.

Bethany's attention shifted to the busy neighbourhoods they passed through and all the different styles of houses. It was on such a large scale compared to the size of their village that she soon stopped dwelling on thoughts of the spirit realm. They finally reached their destination some twenty minutes later, stepping out on to a fairly ordinary main road of shops with streets of redbrick terraced houses leading off from it.

'Follow me, troops,' Mr Chase joked. He walked confidently down a nearby street. Mrs Chase waited patiently until he came back, blushing, and headed off in the other direction. 'I was looking at the map the wrong way round,' he explained.

'Of course, dear,' she said tactfully.

Bethany followed. 'So, why haven't I met Aunt Bess before?' she asked.

'She is a bit eccentric, your aunt,' her mother replied. 'She doesn't tend to stray far out of London. Or her house, come to think of it.'

'That's an exaggeration,' Mr Chase said defensively. 'She's very nice and you have met her, Bethany, but you were very small at the time. I know my sister may seem a little bit odd to some people,' he shot a warning look at Mrs Chase, 'but she is letting us stay for the summer, which is extremely generous. So please bear that in mind.'

Bethany nodded. They came to the end of the road and Mr Chase halted at a rusted gate. The house he had stopped by had been built a few feet off the end of a terraced row of houses, giving it an odd, detached appearance as if it was

turning away from the other buildings. A tall, scruffy hedge occupied most of the front garden.

‘Right, this is us,’ he announced in an excited tone. He stepped through the gate and dropped his bags on the ground by the porch. There was a large front window and he peeked through the dusty pane for signs of life. Bethany and Mrs Chase peered round him. They could just make out a dingy, cluttered room with a sofa and bookshelves. A group of shapes rushed to the window and several sets of small green eyes glinted back at them. Mr Chase murmured uncertainly at the sight of them before pressing the doorbell. Almost at once the shrill bell set off an explosion of barks, miaows, squawks and howls, followed by a rush of tiny feet. This was punctuated a few moments later by a heavier set of footfalls and a stern female voice. ‘Get down! Get down! No, Bernard. Down! No, Marjorie, get out from there. I said *down!*’

The Chases took a cautious step back as the door opened, fully expecting to be engulfed by a stampede of various animals. Instead, an exceedingly tall woman with bright orange lipstick appeared, managing to hold back a collection of excited pets jumping up behind her. She tried her best to grin in a welcoming manner. A marmalade cat broke free from her grasp and dashed out towards the road. ‘Catch him!’ Aunt Bess said in a strained voice.

Luckily, Mrs Chase clasped the animal by the collar before it made it out of the gate. Bethany and her parents were quickly ushered into the house and were soon being

sniffed and pawed by a selection of very energetic dogs and curious cats. Above them, cages of colourful budgies twittered and fluttered.

‘Sorry we’re late,’ Mr Chase said, pecking his sister on the cheek. ‘Delays in Grantham.’

‘Oh, not to worry. Come through. Come through,’ Aunt Bess said in a jolly tone. She had a long thin face, which was very animated, with lots of bright turquoise mascara around her eyes and a head of bushy hair that bore an uncanny resemblance to the overgrown hedge in the front garden. ‘It’s been too long, it really has. And look at you, Bethany. You’re practically touching the ceiling.’

Bethany smiled. There was something immediately likeable about her aunt. Her house was almost the opposite of the Chases’: chaotic, cluttered and lively. Stacks of books littered the shelves, mixed in with an assortment of colourful ornaments and exotic pot plants. The cats had made a series of paths through this bric-a-brac which they briefly retreated to for safety as a scuffle broke out between the dogs.

‘Thanks for having us, sis,’ Mr Chase said over the yapping and mewling sounds. ‘You’re a lifesaver, you really are.’

‘Nonsense. Anything to help out,’ she replied, prising apart the two fighting terriers at her feet. ‘Behave, Bernard. And you, Spike.’

‘Yes, this is . . . lovely,’ Mrs Chase said. She couldn’t help noticing the thick balls of fur that had gathered around the

edges of the room and tried her best to hide an expression of rising alarm. She quickly searched through her bag and produced a box of chocolates. 'These are just to say thank you.'

'Oh, you shouldn't have. It's really no bother having you.' Aunt Bess nudged an older brown Labrador out of the way, then stroked a plump tabby that seemed to be wheezing rather than purring. 'Now then, I'll let you unpack and then I'll bring out sandwiches and cakes. I expect you're famished, and it will be nice to catch up over a cup of tea. Bethany, you're in the room at the top of the stairs. It's quite snug, but hopefully you'll fit.' She showed Bethany to the foot of the stairs and pointed to the door directly at the top. 'You're in the big bedroom,' she told Bethany's parents. 'Up and along.'

Walking up the narrow staircase was an interesting and hazardous task, with the small herd of animals steadily moving in front of Bethany's every step. The cats and dogs wore the expressions of animals anticipating a treat or food, and seemed upset when Bethany closed the bedroom door on them. She found herself standing in an extremely small room that looked as if it was only ever used for storage. Boxes of all sizes were stacked up along the walls. A single bed had somehow been squeezed into the middle of this, looking suspiciously like it had been propped on top of a mass of old suitcases. Bethany slumped down on to the edge of the bed and dropped her bags to the floor. She peered through the tiny square window directly level with the top of the mattress and found herself looking into the window of the adjacent house. It looked much cleaner next door, she

had to admit. And she imagined it must be quieter. The animals were making a racket in the hall, thumping and scrabbling and snuffling.

‘Oh well,’ she sighed, imagining the long summer ahead in this cramped little space. It could be worse, she thought. And at that she thought of the image of Quinn’s smiling face and all the trouble that meeting him again could lead to.

Almost as soon as his name popped into her head, a peculiar thing happened. The nearest and tallest pile of boxes shuddered. Bethany sat bolt upright. She almost leaped backwards as the stack of boxes quivered a second time.

‘Is someone there?’ she asked without thinking. *Of course there couldn’t be anyone there, there was barely enough space for her.*

Nevertheless, the boxes shook again as if reacting to her words, the top ones moving as if they were nodding. Bethany felt herself panic. She stood up with her back against the door and in a barely audible whisper asked, ‘Quinn, is that you?’

The boxes shook furiously, then fell still. Something scuttled from under the bed. Bethany instinctively jumped out of the way, only to bang into an old-fashioned trunk. Shocked, she looked around her feet and saw a black cat stepping from behind a fallen box. It had short sleek fur and a long tail that curled round in a way that reminded Bethany of a question mark. It peered up at her with intense orange eyes, slanted and almost luminous, that gave it a very eerie appearance.

‘A cat,’ she muttered at herself, and burst into a fit of giggles. Of course it was a cat, she thought. What else did she expect in this house? ‘You’re not supposed to be in here,’ she told it.

The animal stared back at her with a great deal of interest and Bethany pulled open the door and shooed it out, then followed it downstairs, as she joined her parents and Aunt Bess. They were already gathered round a small oval table loaded with tea and plates of food.

‘Help yourself,’ Aunt Bess said, handing Bethany a mug of tea. ‘Now there’s egg and cress, tuna or cheese mayo. Or there’s quiche. And have as many cupcakes as you want.’

The food all looked homely and attractive and, Bethany noticed, slightly hairy. Mr Chase was busy chomping through a sandwich, before gulping it down noisily with several slurps of tea.

‘I must say, this makes a nice change. I’m not really used to having visitors,’ Aunt Bess remarked, proffering the plate of cupcakes at Bethany and her mother.

‘Well, we’re just sorry we’ve not made it down sooner,’ Mrs Chase said, plucking a cat hair from the icing on her cake.

‘I like your house,’ Bethany told her aunt. She had noticed lots of unusual paintings filling one wall. They were, predictably, pictures of animals but they had been done using lots of bright, lively colours. ‘And all your animals. What’s the black cat called?’

‘Black cat?’ Aunt Bess said. She brushed a Siamese off her lap as it made a lunge at the quiche.

‘Yeah, it’s got sort of funny orange eyes,’ Bethany explained.

Her aunt looked perplexed and said in a surprised tone, ‘No, I don’t have any black cats. I’ve not had a black cat since Sylvester died a few years ago.’

‘But it was just in my room. It’s probably here somewhere.’ Bethany scanned the mob of animals all looking up expectantly in the hope of being fed a scrap of food, but it wasn’t there.

‘Not to worry. It might be a stray that’s come in through the catflap. Just put it out if you see it again.’ Aunt Bess smiled, then coughed very suddenly and very loudly. ‘Haaarkf ccurrrff cccurfff!’ She dabbed the sides of her mouth with a napkin. ‘Sorry, cat hair,’ she explained, then quickly offered the plate of sandwiches to her guests again. ‘Any more for any more?’

Bethany drifted off as Mr and Mrs Chase began talking about the details of their stay. She was thinking about the nervous feeling in her stomach and trying to tell herself that she definitely had not seen Quinn and that there was nothing unusual about the black cat. *This is going to be a completely normal summer*, she told herself. She surveyed the chaos of her aunt’s house and felt a twinge of doubt. *Well, maybe not completely normal.*

## CHAPTER TWO

# CATS AND CAKES

Most of the following few days were spent sightseeing and exploring parts of London. Mr Chase led the way in a determined, excited manner, with Bethany and her mother trailing after him. They were dragged into packed underground stations, through bustling markets, around echoing museums and inside vast shops, noise and activity swirling around them at every turn. Bethany had never seen so many people before and felt overwhelmed whenever she was carried along in a particularly large crowd, feeling as if she was caught in the current of a slow-moving river from which it was impossible to escape.

Mr Chase insisted on taking them round all the major landmarks he could find. He amused himself by getting

Mrs Chase to photograph him standing close to the lens so that he appeared to be a giant squashing Big Ben under his thumb, or preparing to take a bite out of St Paul's Cathedral, or making it look as if he was pushing Tower Bridge over. They both found this hilarious and kept thinking up new positions to try, bursting into loud giggling fits as they viewed the results. Bethany dutifully followed behind them, but couldn't help feeling preoccupied.

'Come on, Bethany, you do one,' Mr Chase suggested.

'Um, I'm OK. Thanks anyway, Dad.'

She sat down on a step and pulled out her book from her bag.

'It's fun,' her mother said, still sniggering at the picture of Mr Chase looking like he was wearing Nelson's Column as a hat. 'Try one. Make it look like you're pushing the statue over.'

Bethany looked up and smiled. 'It's OK, Mum. You go ahead.'

Mr and Mrs Chase exchanged a brief glance and quietly sighed.

'We're on holiday,' Mr Chase said, sitting down on the steps by his daughter. 'You don't have to read your books or any of that stuff. We're here to enjoy ourselves. That's the whole point of a holiday.'

'I know,' Bethany replied.

'It's just . . . you've been working very hard at school all year. And . . . well, it's really good that you're reading so much. But you do seem to read an awful lot of these books.' He tapped

the cover of the book Bethany was holding. ‘*Encyclopaedia of Supernatural Beings in British Folklore*. Wow. Exciting.’

‘Dad, I don’t make fun of the books you read,’ she said defensively.

‘OK, I know. I’m sorry. What I mean is —’

Mrs Chase interrupted. ‘What your father means is that you’ve become obsessed with all this spirit and supernatural stuff. And maybe it’s not healthy.’

‘But I’m trying to . . .’ Bethany trailed off. She wanted to explain to her parents that she needed to find some answers to her questions. If she hadn’t imagined a spirit realm, and it was all true, then she should know how it worked. She had to make sense of it.

Mrs Chase smiled. ‘Maybe it’s time to concentrate on having fun in the real world for a change. You know, like you used to. You used to love joking around. You used to love taking these sorts of photos.’

Bethany opened her mouth to protest, but found herself unable to speak. This wasn’t the first time she’d had this conversation with her parents. Her cheeks flushed red with embarrassment. *It was true. She had stopped having fun. Ever since last summer she had become serious as if it would help her cope with what had happened.*

‘Come on,’ Mr Chase said, standing up. ‘Let’s put this away and get some ice cream. My treat.’

He reached out for the book and Bethany reluctantly passed it over to him. He put it in his backpack and held her hand. Her mum held her other hand as they hurried over to

the ice-cream van. 'First one there gets a chocolate flake,' he said, running ahead.

'You're cheating,' Bethany shouted, managing to grab tightly on to his hand and pull him back.

Mrs Chase did the same. 'Typical man, can't stick to the rules. Keep a hold, Bethany,' she said, then sprinted off to the ice-cream van ahead of them, laughing hysterically. 'Thanks,' she called over her shoulder.

'Not fair,' Bethany complained, and started laughing as well.

'I don't know. Some people have no shame,' Mr Chase sighed.

The ice-cream vendor viewed them with weary disdain as they giggled breathlessly. Bethany and her mum kept changing the flavour they wanted, pestering Mr Chase until he finally relented and bought them both chocolate flakes, although he ended up in a long and confusing conversation about squirty syrup with the vendor.

As Bethany tucked into her double chocolate ice cream, thinking that maybe her parents were right and it was best to enjoy herself for a change, a glimmer of movement caught her eye among the legs of the passing tourists.

*It can't be,* Bethany thought, peering at the animal with complete and utter bewilderment. *Surely there was no way it could have followed her here all by itself?*

Sitting there on the pavement of Trafalgar Square, miles from Aunt Bess's house, was the black cat with the eerie orange eyes. It was staring directly at Bethany.

She made a move towards the cat but her mother pulled her in the opposite direction towards the fountains. 'Come on, we need to get a photo. We'll do one by the lion statues.'

'But . . .' Bethany murmured.

'I know,' Mr Chase said. 'Make it look like you're feeding the statue your ice cream.'

'Yes, that's a good one,' Mrs Chase agreed.

When Bethany turned back round, the cat had vanished and, despite the summer sunshine, she felt a deep chill run through her.

'Hold it,' Mr Chase called out. 'And ssmmiillee.'

Bethany tried her best to fake a grin.

It didn't take long for the cat to appear again. Several times that day, it turned up in completely different locations. It followed them along a path on the bank of the Thames, where it scampered along walls and through railings to keep up with them, before being scared off by a screeching toddler. Hours later it reappeared as they stopped to admire the music of a busker playing a violin. It weaved through the crowd of tourists to stare deliberately at Bethany again.

'Different class of busker here,' Mr Chase joked as Bethany kept her gaze focused on the strange feline.

She was sure that was the last time they'd see it. They had changed trains on the underground twice and they were on the escalator coming out of the station when they heard the queue of people behind them laughing in surprise and talking excitedly to one another. They were all taking it in

turn to move out of the way as the black cat purposefully ran up the stairs of the escalator.

‘Look,’ Mrs Chase said, noticing the disruption. ‘How funny, someone’s cat must have escaped.’

‘Maybe it’s been looking for mice,’ a stranger remarked wryly.

‘That’s the black cat from Aunt Bess’s house,’ Bethany said, but her voice was drowned out by the laughing adults.

Mrs Chase misheard her daughter and replied, ‘Yes, we could take it back. I’m sure she wouldn’t notice another one.’

Bethany wanted to explain, but was distracted as a young woman in pink glasses picked the cat up and looked for some sort of name tag. The animal squirmed in her arms and stared meaningfully at Bethany.

‘You really do see all sorts in London, don’t you?’ remarked Mr Chase as he walked through the barriers.

Bethany rushed out of the station. There was no way a normal cat could follow her around the city of London, she knew. The question was not *how* it was following her, but *why*?

Bethany led her parents away from the tube station and through an area of old-fashioned lanes with modern shop fronts. Mr and Mrs Chase were keen to stop and browse at some of the more attractive window displays, but Bethany kept dragging them round the next corner. Before long, they became lost in a maze of identical streets and Mrs Chase threw up her hands. ‘OK, enough! I’m exhausted. I vote we stop for coffee and cake.’

‘Maybe just a few more streets?’ Bethany suggested, glancing uncertainly over her shoulder. She tried to herd her fatigued parents up the next road. Ideally, she wanted to find somewhere with lots of doors that could be closed. Her parents had different ideas, though, and drifted to the entrance of a nearby café.

The café was modern and stylish. Customers were gathered around the cramped tables, engrossed in their newspapers and magazines, trying their hardest to ignore each other. Mr Chase was busily admiring a huge glass cake stand that was the centrepiece of the café, each layer laden with plump cakes and glossy pastries.

Bethany, agitated, checked the street for any signs of the four-legged pursuer before she finally took a seat beside her parents.

‘Where do you get your energy from?’ her mother sighed. ‘I know I was saying you need to have more fun, but you can rest in between times, you know.’

Bethany smiled weakly. ‘You know, you’re right. Maybe I should read my book for a bit.’ She rummaged through her father’s bag and found the encyclopaedia, quickly flicking through the pages until she found a relevant section on animals. There were references to cats used as familiars by witches and sorcerers, cats that signified bad luck, cats that represented spirit guides. All the comments seemed to be negative and cautionary but there was nothing specific about black cats that followed you around London and stared at you with eerie orange eyes.

Bethany peeked out of the café window. She wondered what the woman in the pink glasses had done with it. Could you hand in cats at underground stations like lost property? Or would she have taken it to some cat refuge? She felt increasingly worried. *It wasn't a normal cat. Normal cats couldn't follow you like that. But what did it want? Why was it after her?*

Just as Bethany felt they might have shaken it free, she caught sight of it. The cat was sitting by a lamppost outside the café, casually licking its paws. It glanced directly at her.

'Right, that's it.' She pushed back her seat and started towards the door, but she stopped in her tracks. As she peered round the café she felt her head reel at the bizarre sight before her. Several customers appeared to have Quinn's head on their shoulders, replacing their own faces. The identical Quinn heads were frozen in a grinning expression and were facing Bethany. It took her a moment to realise what she was looking at: the customers were all reading the same magazine and were holding it in front of them in such a way that it covered their faces. The cover was a full-size picture of Quinn's head with his impossibly wide grin, mischievous eyes and quiff of pink hair.

The Quinn faces winked at her.

She smiled, feeling briefly reassured by his face. 'Quinn?' she said, as if hoping that he could answer back.

The strange illusion was broken as the various customers shifted position. The gentleman nearest Bethany placed the magazine on to the table and picked up his shopping to

leave. At that moment Bethany noticed the black cat moving to the entrance of the café and sneezing three times very precisely in her direction. A single orange fell free from the shopping bag of the man leaving the café and rolled towards the till, lodging under the foot of a passing waiter carrying a tray of dirty cups. His legs wobbled comically as he slipped on it and he was sent flying backwards into the giant cake stand at the centre of the café. He hit it with such force that the entire structure swayed left, then right, then the whole thing toppled down to the ground. Jammy sponges, chocolate éclairs, cream cakes, gateaux, roulades and meringues were catapulted across the café. The glass stand landed with an almighty crashing sound.

No one moved for several seconds and Bethany looked in disbelief at the scene of chaos. The falling stand had narrowly missed both her parents, but it had crushed the chair that she had been sitting in moments before. Turning, she saw the cat slinking away from the café, a distinctly satisfied expression on its face.

As the dust settled, Mr and Mrs Chase looked over at her. They were covered in an assortment of cakes. An entire chocolate gâteau had landed on Mr Chase's head and sloped sideways like a large, elaborate hat. Mrs Chase picked at a cherry bakewell that drooped over her eye. 'An interesting way to serve cakes,' she noted drolly.

Bethany didn't speak on the tube back to Aunt Bess's house. Her thoughts were in a whirl. She didn't really understand

how or why she had narrowly avoided death by cakes but she was sure the signs were ominous. The spirit realm seemed to be intervening in the real world and that couldn't be good. The cat, whatever it was, was capable of magic, and not the nice sort.

Her parents were unaware of their daughter's agitation and were too busy laughing at each other dressed in staff shirts given to them by the café. They were returning during rush hour and the carriages were filled with people. Bethany barely noticed the journey back, worrying about what she was going to do. She was pulled from her thoughts abruptly as Mr Chase said, 'Quinn?'

Bethany's head jerked up. 'What? What did you just say?'

Mr Chase had picked up a magazine a previous passenger had left behind on their seat and was examining it intently. 'Odd-looking chap, isn't he?' he remarked, showing Bethany the front cover. It was a picture of Quinn.

'You can see him too?' Bethany asked. She had assumed that Quinn had used magic to appear on the magazines, magic that only she could see. *I mean, it would be madness for him to actually display himself on a magazine cover for everyone to look at. Why would he do that?* Even for him, that would be strange.

'Of course I can,' her father laughed. 'Is he from a film or something? He looks quite a character.'

'Um . . . yeah. Yeah, I think so,' Bethany lied. 'Can I have a look at that a moment?'

As her father passed it over she could see that it was the same magazine she had noticed the customers reading in the café. And, she realised, it was probably what she had seen her first day in London – someone holding the magazine up in the street as they waited to cross the road. She looked at the picture of him now and found it strange to see him up close. It looked like the head of a fat man but weirdly smooth and artificial as if it wasn't a proper photograph. His grin was exceptionally wide and curled into a brilliant smile. The caption on the cover read: *Here Comes Quinn*. Eagerly, Bethany flicked through it for some more information, but she was interrupted as her mother clutched her hand.

'This is our stop,' Mrs Chase said, yanking Bethany to the doors. The magazine fell from her grip.

'But I need to read that!' Bethany insisted.

Her parents were already stepping off the train, though, and they pulled Bethany on to the platform with them. When she looked at the departing train, she could see several people holding up the same magazine. An old granny, a large biker with tattooed arms and a young man with lots of gold jewellery – all were transformed momentarily into grinning Quinns.