

Chapter Two

Evie and I look at the penguin in the garden and then we look at each other. 'WHY?' we both say.

'I . . . I . . . I don't understand!' I stammer.

Then Evie takes charge of the situation. She likes taking charge. 'What on EARTH is a live penguin doing in my garden?' she exclaims. 'Climate change must be a lot worse than I thought if penguins are turning up in people's gardens! Come on – let's rescue it! Bring a pillowcase!'

'Pillowcase?'

'Yes, we can drape it over the penguin so it doesn't get alarmed – like putting a cloth over a parrot cage.'

Evie's parents have gone shopping, and Liam is engrossed in his latest computer game – Horrible Assassin 2 – so there is no one to question us about why we are rushing out of the front door with a pillowcase.

'Slow down,' hisses Evie. 'We don't want to alarm it. Oh – look! It's *sooo* cute!'

'Are you sure this isn't a dream?' I ask in a hushed

voice. 'Weird things happen in dreams, like penguins suddenly appearing . . . ouch!' Evie has just pinched me.

'You're not dreaming,' she says, as we very slowly approach the penguin.

The penguin doesn't look alarmed – it looks dazed. It doesn't move as we crouch down beside it.

'Oh, I do hope it's not injured!' I whisper.

'It doesn't look injured . . .'

'Who's going to pick it up?'

Evie takes the pillowcase. 'I am,' she says, sounding a little nervous. 'I've always wanted to p—, p—, pick up a penguin. I hope it doesn't peck me!'

Very gently, Evie covers the penguin with the pillowcase and lifts it up.

'Uh-oh – it's struggling! Quick – back to my room!'

Safely back in Evie's room, we carefully unwrap the penguin. Its beak is wide open, probably in alarm, and it waddles and stumbles across the bedroom floor. It looks hot and bothered.

'Open the door of the mini-fridge – we could sit it next to the fridge to cool down,' I suggest.

'I don't want to stress it out,' Evie replies. 'We probably shouldn't keep handling it. Wow! My very own *real* penguin! This is awesome!'

'Yes – but you can't keep it!'

'I *know*! The thing is, I think I recognise it! It's the penguin chick from the Eco Gardens. It had its picture in the paper because it was the first Adelie penguin chick

bred in captivity for several years. I even remember they called him Pablo!

‘But how do you know it’s Pablo?’

‘Because he’s got a big white spot on the back of his head, and most Adelie penguins have completely black heads. So he’s really unusual!’

I look closely at Pablo. Apart from the white spot, the rest of his head and back are black and he has white rings around his eyes. He keeps opening his short beak.

‘Why is he doing that?’ I ask.

‘He’s probably hot – or he may be hungry,’ Evie replies.

Neither of us can take our eyes off the penguin.

‘How on earth did he end up in Frog Street, anyway?’ Evie continues. ‘Come on, Lola! Why are we just sitting here? I’ll contact the Eco Gardens – I’ll ring them – they must be worried sick. Go and get Pablo some water – oh, and a tin of sardines, in case he’s hungry!’

Evie can be a *tiny* bit bossy sometimes, but I put up with it when it’s in a good cause, like now.

I find Liam in the kitchen, raiding the fridge.

‘Hi,’ he says, flicking back his long dark fringe and grinning at me.

I feel incredibly hot – it must be the effect of global warming.

‘Er, hi!’ I reply. ‘Do you have any sardines?’ It seems an odd thing to say. Liam must think I’m odd. I *feel* odd.

‘I think there’s a tin in the cupboard. Help yourself. Why do you want sardines?’

'Um . . . um . . . fish oils! Fish oils – they're good for your brain!'

'Is that so?'

'Yes! They're . . . great! But . . . but I must go!'

Clutching the tin of sardines, a one-and-a-half litre non-recyclable plastic – BAD, VERY BAD – bottle of



water and the last tattered shreds of my fragile self-esteem – Liam thinks I'm mad – I rush back to Evie's room. Why didn't I just tell him there was a really cute penguin in his sister's bedroom? I think I just felt silly and wanted to escape. Liam might not have believed me. I also wanted to get back to Pablo – he is *sooooo* sweet!

'You look really hot,' Evie remarks.

'I *am* hot. Have you spoken to the Eco Gardens?'

'Yes, I've told them we found Pablo in the garden and we're keeping him safe. Someone's going to get back to us in a moment. I left my mobile number.'

Just as she tells me this, her phone rings.

'Yes . . . yes . . . yes . . .' she says, while I do an agitated

little dance, wondering what is being said. Pablo has waddled off into a corner and is pecking at one of Evie's soft toys. 'OK,' says Evie, putting down her phone. 'They're coming to get him now. It must be a zillion-to-one chance that he ended up in *my* garden! They've got CCTV footage which shows two youths running away with Pablo, so at least they don't think that *we* took him.'

'That's good!' I exclaim.

'The person I spoke to sounded really grateful – almost close to tears,' says Evie. 'She said they've been having a bad time recently and losing Pablo was the final straw.'

'What sort of bad time?'

'I'm not sure . . . Can I feed Pablo?'

'You can try – I'm not having much luck.'

I have poured some water into an empty pencil tin and pushed it right under Pablo's beak, but he doesn't seem interested. He keeps waddling away. 'How are we going to feed him these sardines?' I ask.

'Parent penguins feed their chicks by regurgitation,' Evie comments. 'So we need to chew up the sardines, swallow them, and then bring them back up . . .'

'Eurgh – gross!' I roll my eyes at her and make a gagging noise.

'OK, maybe not,' she says. 'Why don't we try emptying the sardines into the water?'

She lifts the ring-pull and peels back the lid. A strong smell of sardine fills the room. Pablo opens his beak and lunges at the tin. With a shriek, Evie drops the tin, and

water and sardines fly in all directions. Pablo waddles around, gobbling them up. Then he poos.

‘Oh – Lola!’ Evie exclaims. ‘My room’s going to *stink!*’

‘It’s not *my* fault! Do you still want a penguin as a pet? Er, and your mum and dad have just got back with the shopping,’ I comment, looking out of the window.

Evie gives another shriek. ‘Help! Huge crisis! Mum will go mad if she finds a penguin in the house. She will seriously flip! What are we going to do? Oh, Lola – help!’

It is my turn to take charge. I shoo Pablo as gently as possible into the corner where the great heap of soft toys is piled. He blends in with them and could easily pass as a stuffed penguin as long as he doesn’t move, but he seems to be falling asleep anyway. Quickly I cover the white slick of penguin poo with a fluffy pink rug and scoop up the remaining bits of sardine with a handful of tissues and stuff them in the bin, just in time!

We can hear Evie’s mum coming up the stairs. ‘Yoo-hoo!’ she calls. ‘We’re back!’

Evie looks like a rabbit – or a penguin – caught in headlights. ‘I . . . must . . . focus,’ she says. ‘Stay calm. What would Sherlock Holmes do at a moment of crisis, or when trying to solve a mystery such as a kidnapped penguin turning up in his garden?’ We have been reading Sherlock Holmes stories at school – Evie and I are both in Year Eight at Shrubberylands Comprehensive. ‘Of course! He’d pick up his violin and play!’

Evie seizes her violin from the open case beside her bed, and draws the bow across the strings just as her

mum enters the room.

‘Ah! Doing your practice – what a good girl!’ says Evie’s mum, making a valiant effort not to look pained at the distressed-cat-screeching noises which Evie is wringing out of her instrument.

Evie’s mum frowns and wrinkles her nose. ‘Why does it smell of fish in here?’ she asks.

I see Pablo step forward and I do a quick side step to stand in front of him. Behind me he starts making a strange rasping noise – he has a voice that could grate cheese. I realise that he must have thought that Evie’s violin-playing was the sound of another penguin calling to him, and he is answering.

‘What’s that noise?’ Evie’s mum asks suspiciously.

‘It’s my violin, Mum!’

‘But I can still hear it, and you’re not even playing.’

‘It’s . . . it’s an echo.’ Hastily, Evie starts playing again.

Unfortunately, whatever her violin is saying in Adelie-penguin language – perhaps it’s a mating call – Pablo responds by barging past my legs and waddling towards her, rasping away.

All hell breaks loose. Evie’s mum screams louder than I have ever heard a mother scream before, and Evie’s dad and Liam come charging up the stairs.

‘Whatever’s going on?’ her dad demands, bursting into the room. ‘What . . . what on earth is a live penguin doing in here?’

‘He’s not doing any harm!’ Evie protests. ‘Stop scaring him!’

Evie's mum flees downstairs. It takes a little while to explain the situation to Evie's dad. Liam is fascinated.

'Now I know why you wanted those sardines! Why didn't you say?' he asks me.

'Er . . . ' Probably because I seem to be incapable of saying anything except 'er'.

'Hello, little fellow!' says Liam gently, crouching down. 'Are you still hungry? There's some nice fresh fish over here . . . '

'Leave Posh and Pout alone!' Evie exclaims indignantly.

'Stop it, Liam,' says her dad. 'So the people from the Eco Gardens will be here soon to collect him, will they?'

'Yes, Dad. They're on their way.'

'You've done the right thing. Well done, both of you.'

'Thanks, Dad.'

In the pause that follows, we hear Evie's mum calling in a strange, strangled voice from the bottom of the stairs. 'Get . . . that . . . penguin . . . out . . . of . . . here!'

From the street we hear the familiar jingle of Meltonio's Marvellous Mouth-watering Eco-friendly Ices as Meltonio's specially-adapted battery-powered van trundles slowly past our house. Meltonio is our friend – he is just as passionate about green causes as we are.

'Oh, good!' Liam exclaims. 'Ice-cream! It's so hot – I seriously need to chill!'

Suddenly, inspiration strikes me. 'We could ask Meltonio to keep Pablo in his van until the Eco Gardens people get here. It's nice and cool in the van – good for penguins.'

‘And good for Mum because the penguin would be out of the house. Brilliant, Lola! You go and ask – I’ll bring Pablo.’

Meltonio doesn’t understand at first. He thinks that I am offering him a Penguin biscuit, and politely declines as he hands Liam a double-scoop Strawberry Sunrise Sorbet (which is my favourite, too. Liam and I share similar tastes!).

When I explain that the penguin I am talking about is a real one, Meltonio looks worried and says that he is concerned about the Health and Safety implications of having a live penguin in his van. I say that it will probably only be for a few minutes until the Eco Gardens people arrive. Then Evie comes out of the house with Pablo wrapped in the pillowcase, looking *reeeally* cute, and Meltonio relents – he has a soft spot for all animals and birds. His droopy black moustache ripples as his face creases into a big smile.

‘Poor little guy!’ he says gently. ‘I will put him next to the freezer until his owners get here. I can disinfect the van afterwards.’

I can see Mrs Fossett from across the road craning her neck to see what is going on as she clips her hedge. She is the original nosy neighbour, and is always gossiping with her friends, Mrs Baggot and Mrs Throgmorton. Evie and I refer to them, in private, as the Three Witches. Mum told me off about this until they complained about our overgrown hedge and said it lowered the tone of the street; she hasn’t told me off since.



THE THREE WITCHES

Pablo is pecking at a Mouth-watering Melon Sugar-free Non-Dairy Nice-Ice, which Meltonio is offering him.

‘He likes his food!’ says Meltonio approvingly. Meltonio also likes his food and is quite round.

We eat our ice-creams and watch Pablo while we wait for the people from the Eco Gardens to arrive. Meltonio sings gently to Pablo, who seems to go into a kind of trance.

‘He’s enjoying the singing . . .’ Evie whispers to me.

‘Or else he’s not feeling well,’ I say, wishing the Eco Gardens people would hurry up.

‘Here comes the van!’ Evie exclaims, sounding relieved. The Eco Gardens has a fleet of green-coloured vans which run on bio-fuel, made from animal and bird poo from their own enclosures. I learned this at the Education Zone when we visited the Eco Gardens. I am amazed that the van doesn’t smell bad at all.

The Principal Keeper introduces herself and tells us that her name is Kate Meadowsweet. She has curly blond hair and a warm smile. She is bursting with gratitude for the safe return of Pablo. The Penguin Keeper, a slim girl called Annie, her hair tied back in a ponytail, wearing the same uniform of green shirt and shorts as Kate, is equally grateful.

Annie carefully lifts Pablo out of Meltonio's van and puts him into a special penguin-carrier in the back of the Eco Gardens' van. She says that he looks fine after his adventure but that he will be given a full health check by their resident vet.

'We take the utmost care of all our animals and birds,' Kate explains. 'So I do hope you won't take any notice of the awful rumours flying around at the moment about the Eco Gardens. There's absolutely no truth in them. I'm afraid there's a really nasty whispering campaign going on.'

'Oh, we wouldn't believe a word of it,' says Evie. 'We *know* how much you care.'

'Good,' says Kate, smiling ruefully. 'We're beginning to think that someone is trying to get us closed down, but we don't know why. One of the worst rumours is that our birds are carrying the bird-flu virus, which is obviously going to worry a lot of people. But it is absolutely NOT true!'

'I saw that rumour in a letter to the local paper,' says Evie's dad, who has come out to join us – her mum is hiding indoors, still presumably in the grip of severe

penguinophobia. 'I didn't really take it too seriously, but I'm afraid my colleague on the council, George Pollard-Morris, *did* take it seriously. George is a confirmed hypochondriac, seriously worried by germs, so you may have a visit from the Health and Safety Inspectors. He'll feel that he must do the responsible thing, obviously, since you lease the land for the Eco Gardens from the council.'

'Oh well,' says Kate with a sigh. 'At least they'll find that everything's fine and they'll give us a clean bill of health – as long as we haven't lost so much support in the meantime that we've gone out of business. Our lease is up for renewal, and these rumours couldn't have come at a worse time. I'd really appreciate it if you would keep the news of Pablo's kidnap quiet. It's so easy to distort facts, and we don't need any more bad publicity. If visitor numbers fall or our charitable donations dry up, we may not be able to keep going.'

Evie and I look so horror-struck that Kate gives us both a hug and assures us that everything will be fine. She invites us to come to the Eco Gardens with our families as her guests tomorrow and she invites Meltonio to come and sell his ices there. Kate goes on to say that she can offer us a small reward, but that the Eco Gardens is seriously short of money. Dad tells her not to worry about giving us a reward, but that we will look forward to visiting the Eco Gardens tomorrow.

'Oh, thank you,' says Kate. 'I feel like a pelican at the moment – no matter which way I turn, there's always a large bill in front of my face!'

Before she and Annie drive away with Pablo, Kate apologises for the fact that we will have a visit from the police later on. She explains that it is just a formality, meaning that they have to ask questions and fill in forms – but we are not under suspicion, Kate will make sure of that. They just want to catch the people who *really* took Pablo.

‘My guess is that whoever took him is connected with these rumours,’ says Kate. ‘They wanted to spread panic by going on about bird flu and then dumping poor Pablo in a public place to frighten people. But for whatever reason, they abandoned him in your garden. Luckily for us.’

We all wave as the green eco-van drives away.

‘Phew! What a day!’ exclaims Evie, tossing her red curls and kicking off her sky-blue Ethletic canvas boots which are Fair Trade footwear made with sustainably-tapped natural rubber (I am seriously envious of Evie for owning a pair, but Mum says they’re too expensive – it must help to have a dad who works in a bank, and a mum who stocks them in her shop.) ‘The police were nice, weren’t they?’

‘Yes – they obviously believed us. I wish we could help them catch the people who took Pablo.’

‘We WILL help them,’ says Evie firmly. ‘And we WILL find out who’s spreading those evil rumours. And we WILL save the Eco Gardens!’ She sounds very confident for someone who likes to make lists of Things to Worry About.