



CHAPTER ONE

It was an ordinary, boring Wednesday afternoon. Until, quite suddenly, it wasn't.

It's double Science on Wednesdays. Miss Drupe showed us a film about Food Chains. It wasn't very cheerful. This green stuff called algae got eaten by this invisible stuff called plankton. The plankton got eaten by a fish, the fish got eaten by a seal and then the seal got eaten by a shark.

The seal had whiskers and big, chocolate-y eyes. When the shark grabbed it, everyone went *Oooh!* and *Awww!* and Maisie Milligan started to cry. Nobody bothered about the fish much, or the poor plankton. As for the algae – well, that's how it works, isn't it?

Plants get eaten all the time, and never get a chance to eat anybody back.

Or that's what I thought.

'And now,' said Miss Drupe, when the film was over, 'you are going to make up your own food chains, and draw them in your books.'

I drew some grass, then a cow. I'm not brilliant at art; my cow looked more like a Labrador. I borrowed Maisie's pink gel pen and gave it a strawberry-scented udder, to make it more cow-like. What eats cows? I drew a stick man. What eats people? I chewed the end of my pencil. Lions? Tigers? Zombies? Tyrannosaurus Rex?

I had just decided on a crocodile (I can draw them) and was reaching for the green pen when the classroom door opened and Mr Stilton, the head teacher, stalked in.

Mr Stilton has a face like a disappointed sheep. He nodded at Miss Drupe, then peered at us all over the top of his glasses.

'Dandelion?' he said. 'Dandelion Bone?'

A few people giggled. They always do. I looked down at my science book.

'Dan?' said Miss Drupe. 'Day-dreaming again, I suppose. *Dan!*'

There are two Dans in our class. One of them is Daniel Roberts. *His* parents didn't ruin his life by naming him Dandelion. The other one is me.

I asked Dad, once, why they'd done it.

'It's tradition. All the eldest sons in our family are called Dandelion. They always have been. It's my name too,' he pointed out. 'It never did me any harm.'

'Really?' I didn't believe it. 'Are you telling me that you never got teased? Not *ever*?'

'Well, maybe a bit,' he admitted. 'Well, maybe quite a lot. But it wasn't all because of my name. It was the whole being-a-nerd thing. Beetles and stuff. You know.'

I did know. My parents are Entomologists, which is the posh word for being Totally and Ridiculously Obsessed with Insects. Insects matter more to them than anything else in the world – and that includes their children. My sister Martha complains when the Parasitic Fig Wasp gets more attention than she does. The Grub's still a baby and hasn't realized yet that it's less important than the Madagascan Hissing Cockroach. I'm the eldest, so I've had longest to get used to it.

It might have been confusing, Dad and I having the same name, but we managed. We cut it up into fractions: I was Dan; he was Lion. (My grandfather was Del. Dan-Del-Lion.) Dad's third of the name didn't really suit him. He wasn't very lion-ish. Glasses, knobbly knees, and his favourite food was cauliflower cheese. But he was Dad, and he was OK. So was Mum.

Which is why it came as a bit of a shock when Mr Stilton took me to his office and told me that they had both been eaten by cannibals.

I had never been in the Head Teacher's office before. You only go if you're really good or really bad. I'm never *really* anything: I'm just me. It was a musty, mud-coloured room, with old school photos on the walls and a very large desk. In front of the desk, rocking on her chair and chewing bubble gum, was my sister Martha. She had a witch's hat on her head, made out of black paper and sticky tape; Year 4 were getting ready for Halloween.

Mrs Butters was there too. Mrs Butters is the Teaching Assistant in Martha's class. She's a kind lady who gives you plasters when you fall over, even if you're not bleeding. Martha says she smiles too much. (Martha's fussy about people.) She wasn't smiling now. She was blowing her nose into a paper tissue.

'Sit down, Dandelion,' said Mr Stilton.

I waited for him to say something to Martha about the chair-rocking and chewing – they're both against school rules – but he didn't. Martha hardly ever gets told off. It's because she's small for her age and looks like a meerkat.

Mr Stilton sat down opposite us. He gave a little

cough and straightened some papers, looking more like a sheep than ever: a sheep who has just discovered what mint sauce is for. Out in the playground, Mr Clench was barking at Year 3 to line up at the end of their PE lesson. A fly buzzed against the window. A clock ticked on the wall, ticking away the last minute of my life – my life as it had been for a whole eleven years, and never would be again.

Then he told us about our parents. And the cannibals.

Nobody said anything for quite a long time – unless you count Mrs Butters, sniffing into her tissue. I could hear my heart beating; the rest of me seemed to have stopped working. My brain had jammed, like a computer when it freezes.

It was Martha who broke the silence. ‘Do cannibals eat you raw? Or cooked?’

We all looked at her. Mrs Butters made a noise like a trodden-on cat.

‘What?’ said Martha crossly. ‘It’s not like it’s *true*!’

Mr Stilton cleared his throat. ‘I’m afraid that there is . . . evidence. As I understand it, your parents’ expedition had taken them a long way into the rainforest – further than most people go . . .’

‘They’re looking – they *were* looking – for the Greater-Spotted Giant Purple One-Horned Dung

Beetle,' I said. My voice had a wobble in it; it didn't sound like me. 'It's very rare. Nobody's seen it for over a hundred years.'

Mr Stilton shuffled his papers. 'Your parents became separated from their guides; nobody knows how, or why. Trackers were sent out to search for them but all they found was . . . this.'

Sliding something out of a brown envelope, he pushed it across the desk towards us. It was a photograph of two people holding hands. Or rather – what was left of two people, which wasn't very much. The hands and a bit of arm, about halfway up to the elbow . . . I could see a man's wedding ring, and a SpongeBob SquarePants watch – just like the one we had given Dad for Christmas. The other hand was wearing a silver ring with a tiny blue scarab beetle set in it, like the one Mum always, always wore . . .

I felt hot, then cold. Then a bit sick. Martha had stopped chewing.

Mr Stilton gave another of his little coughs. 'The young lady who looks after you—'

'She's not a young lady,' said Martha. 'She's Caramel.'

' . . . is on her way to pick you up. You need to collect all your belongings,' Mr Stilton went on, 'as you are unlikely to be coming back to this school. You will be going to live with your aunt and uncle.'

‘But,’ I said, ‘we don’t have any aunts or uncles.’

Mr Stilton frowned and looked down at his papers. ‘It says here – Lady Grusilla Bone, Daundelyon Hall, Witches’ Cross.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Her. She’s not exactly an aunt. More of a *great*-aunt. Or even a great-great-aunt. We’ve never met her.’

‘I’m not going to live with someone I’ve never met,’ stated Martha. ‘I might not like her.’

‘She might not like us,’ I said.

‘I’m not going,’ Martha was definite. ‘You can’t make me.’

A week later we were on a train, heading for Daundelyon Hall – and Great-Aunt Grusilla.

The train was crowded. Caramel pushed Martha and me into seats opposite two old ladies. ‘I won’t be far away,’ she told us. ‘I’ll be sitting over there, with the Grub. Dan, look after Martha.’

‘Don’t you dare even *try*!’ hissed Martha, as we squeezed into our seats. She started arranging her dinosaurs so they could see out of the window. Martha’s not really the sort of sister you *can* look after without getting a kick, or a stegosaurus thrown at your head.

Caramel made her way down the carriage and sat in the only seat left, next to a young man with a bushy

ginger beard, brightly coloured arms and a tarantula tattooed on his neck. Caramel looked him up and down and offered him a chocolate.

Caramel believed in chocolate; she also believed in charms to keep away bad luck. Chocolate and charms: she liked to have plenty of both with her at all times. Her chocolate was stashed in bags and pockets and under her pillow; her good luck was inked on her skin. Her arms and legs and back were a rainbow swirl of horseshoes and shamrocks and sugar skulls and charms against the Evil Eye.

‘We can’t be too careful, in my family,’ she’d explained. ‘Things happen to us – more than they do to other people. We choke on fish bones and get struck by lightning and trampled by mad cows. My gran would never get out of bed on a Friday the thirteenth, she was so afraid of bad things happening. Until one Friday the thirteenth the bedroom ceiling fell down on her. My Auntie Melba got towed away in a portable toilet. My cousin Candy got stuck in a lift and missed her own wedding. Then there was the business of Uncle Roly and his false teeth . . . but we don’t talk about *that*: it was too dreadful. All I can tell you is that there was a very *large* amount of blood.’

It was Dad who had chosen Caramel to look after us while he and Mum were away looking for the Greater-

Spotted Giant Purple One-horned Dung Beetle. All sorts of people had applied for the job. They all said how much they loved children – you could tell that they hadn't met Martha.

Mum wasn't totally sure about Caramel. I think it was the motorbike and the bristly hair that put her off – but Dad said she was perfect. 'She can't help it,' he'd said, 'with a name like Caramel Lovejoy.'

It hurt, thinking about Mum and Dad. As I sat squashed in my corner, staring out of the train window at the trees and hedges and fields whooshing by, the top of my nose prickled. I had to blink, to stop the world turning wet and blurry. The two old ladies opposite were eating sandwiches and drinking tea out of a thermos flask. I think they must have noticed the blinking because they started smiling at me in a kind, sympathetic sort of way. *That's all we need*, I thought gloomily. I glanced at Martha, who was reading her book: *A History of Famous Murderers Through the Ages*. Martha isn't good with kind old ladies.

One of them rustled about a bit in her bag and brought out a packet of rich tea biscuits. 'Would you like one, ducks?'

'No, thank you.' I smiled back, as politely as I could.

Then, of course, they had to offer one to Martha. Martha looked up from *Famous Murderers* and stared

suspiciously at the rich tea biscuit.

‘No, thank you,’ she said, at last. ‘I don’t take biscuits from strangers. I can’t tell if they’ve been poisoned.’

The old lady looked a bit startled but said she could tell Martha was a very sensible little girl. Martha frowned. She hates it when people call her little.

The journey seemed to go on for ever. Towns and stations came and went. The old ladies got off without saying goodbye. I didn’t blame them. A mother and her toddler sat down in their place, then some giggling teenage girls, then a businessman in a suit who disappeared behind his newspaper. Down the carriage, I could see the Grub snoozing on Caramel’s lap while she and the man with the ginger beard admired each other’s nose piercings.

Diddly-dee, diddly-doop. Martha had put down her book and was playing her favourite game: *Rob-it Rabbit and the Attack of the Carrot-Monster*. *Diddly-dee, diddly-doop, diddly diddly diddly . . .* Until, at last, she ran out of lives. *Diddly DOOP DOOP DOOP!*

‘Stupid rabbit,’ said Martha. ‘Who cares?’

I tried to read my book but mostly just stared out of the window. We had started the journey in sunshine; now rain was streaking the glass. The drops were all travelling backwards. I wanted to go backwards too –

back in time to Before Cannibals. The businessman was still rustling his paper. I looked at the headlines: some royal person was going to have a baby; somebody had thrown an egg at the Prime Minister; an Indian rhinoceros had gone missing from a wildlife park; a footballer had crashed his Ferrari into a tree; heavy rain and flooding expected . . .

Finally the speaker crackled.

Our next station stop will be Witches' Cross, in approximately two minutes' time. Passengers are reminded to take all their personal belongings with them. Please mind the gap between the train and the platform . . .

Down the carriage, Caramel was rising to her feet, causing a small avalanche of chocolate wrappers. We were there.