

HOLLY RIVERS



Chicken
House

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‘Surely that can’t be it?’ said Orinthia, sweeping her dark fringe from her eyes as they came to a standstill at the top of the hill. ‘It looks like it’s about to fall down!’

She and her younger brothers, Séafra and Taber, were looking down at a ramshackle old windmill which stood in the field below. Its crumbling pink brickwork had been half engulfed by the surrounding woodland, and its sails were frozen like the hands of a stopped clock.

Séafra edged forward, looking equally confused. ‘Maybe we followed the wrong path?’ he suggested. ‘Or made a mistake with the address?’

‘Hmmm . . . let me double check,’ said Orinthia. She reached into the front pocket of her duffel bag and pulled out the advertisement which the siblings

had taken from the noticeboard on the village green earlier that afternoon. They'd been on their way to Mr Barnabas's sweet shop for coconut ice when they'd come across it – pinned between a poster for SMITH & SONS FUNERAL PARLOUR (BUY ONE COFFIN GET ONE FREE) and a notice from the park warden reminding dog owners that POODLE POO WON'T PICK ITSELF UP.

It had caught their attention immediately. With tomorrow being the first day of the summer holidays, and with Mum far too busy with work as usual, the siblings were going to have to entertain themselves for the *entirety* of the six-week break. Orinthia had been dreading it – the long tedious days, the endless jigsaw puzzles, the inevitable squabbles with her brothers. The advertisement sounded so much more exciting!

She unfolded the paper and ran a finger from top to bottom. It read:

SCHOOL CHILDREN WANTED FOR PAID SUMMER HOLIDAY WORK

APPLICANTS MUST BE HAPPY WORKING WITH ANIMALS, KNOW HOW TO ADDRESS AN ENVELOPE, AND NOT TAKE UP TOO MUCH SPACE.

FULL TRAINING WILL BE PROVIDED, BUT BASIC KNOWLEDGE OF TEA-MAKING AND EGG BOILING IS DESIRABLE.

HARD WORKERS ONLY.

MALINGERERS, SHIRKERS, CRY BABIES AND LAZYBONES NEED NOT APPLY.

IF INTERESTED, PLEASE ENQUIRE IN PERSON AT:

TUPENNY MILL,
ST SYLVESTER'S MOUNT,
LITTLE PENHALLOW

'So?' Séafra asked, peering over his sister's shoulder. 'Is this the right place?'

Orinthia looked around, shielding her eyes from the early summer sun as she tried to get her bearings. 'Well, we're definitely on St Sylvester's Mount,' she replied, scanning their surroundings. 'And that's the only mill *I* can see . . .'

Séafra shuddered. 'Urrghhh . . . But it's so creepy. Who would run a business from a place like that?'

Orinthia surveyed the field below, thinking that perhaps there might be another, less decrepit-looking building nestled somewhere amongst the trees. But there wasn't. Whoever had pinned the job advertisement to the noticeboard worked here in this ancient, tumbledown edifice.

'Rinthi, you said we were going to see some animals!' groaned Taber, shuffling from foot to foot as he looked up at his big sister. He was short for his

six years, with a round face and cheeks the colour of peaches. Just like his older siblings, his tresses were jet black, but his were wild and thick, sticking up in unruly tufts. ‘Where are the animals? I can’t see them!’

‘There aren’t any, Tabs,’ Séafra butted in sharply. ‘There’s nothing to see here—’

‘Oh, come on, Séa,’ Orinthia countered, unbuttoning her knitted cardigan and tying it around her waist. ‘You don’t know that. We should at least go down there and have a look. We’ve come all this way.’

‘Rinthi, are you joking?’ Séafra snapped back. ‘This looks like the kind of place you’d come across in a ghost story! Who knows what might be lurking inside?’

Orinthia sighed. Why did her brother always have to be so sensible? At eleven years old he was one year her junior, but he behaved like a grumpy old man. ‘Séafra Shaloo, you should never judge a book – or a windmill – by its cover. It might be really nice inside.’

‘Or it might be even spookier!’ snapped Séafra. He snatched the advertisement from his sister and waved it in her face. ‘This could be a kidnapper trying to lure us in!’

‘Oh, stop catastrophizing, Séa!’ said Orinthia with a tut. ‘It’s probably just an old biddy who wants someone to look after her cats and run her errands.’

And besides, it's good to take risks sometimes. Like Ophelia Pearcart always said: "*One cannot discover new oceans unless—*"

"—*unless one has the courage to lose sight of the shore*," interrupted Séafra with a roll of his eyes. 'Yes, yes, we know what boring old Ophelia Pearcart said. You've only told us a squillion times before.'

Orinthia crossed her arms with a huff. Ophelia Pearcart was definitely *not* boring. How could her brother say such a thing about one of the greatest explorers ever to have lived? She'd discovered hidden civilizations deep within the Amazon jungle, and scaled snowy mountains in search of yetis! She'd clambered atop dusty ruins, swum through tropical archipelagos, and sailed across each of the seven seas! Orinthia had read her diaries so many times that she could name every one of her two hundred expeditions off by heart. And when *she* was older, she was going to follow in Ophelia's footsteps and become a famous explorer too!

'I tell you what, Séa,' Orinthia pressed, giving her brother a gentle nudge and softening her voice. 'We'll just take a quick peek inside. We might be pleasantly surprised. And by the end of the day we could have summer jobs!'

‘We could be dead, more like,’ Séafra muttered under his breath. ‘Rinthe, I’m not going in there, and that’s the end of it!’

‘Fine,’ said Orinthia. ‘But I am!’ She crouched down beside her youngest brother and smiled. ‘What do you say, Tabs? Are you coming to see if we can find the animals? Or are you going to stay here with grumpy old Séafra?’

‘Find the animals!’ Taber replied, jumping up and down excitedly, much to Séafra’s annoyance. There was nothing Taber liked more than nature: foraging for conkers and pine cones, or upturning rocks to delight in the swarming masses of creepy-crawlies lurking beneath. ‘I want to find the animals!’ he continued. ‘Animals! Animals!’

‘Good,’ said Orinthia, looking pointedly at Séafra. ‘At least *one* of my little brothers has a sense of adventure.’ She took Taber by the hand, and as they strode off down the hill, she called back, ‘See you at home, scaredy pants!’

Orinthia grinned mischievously to herself as she headed through the long grasses towards the old mill. She knew it had been childish to name-call, but Séafra was far too much of a worrywart for her liking. He balked at even the slightest hint of danger, and

always expected the worst. But what was life without a few surprises? For instance, if all the archaeologists in the world had settled for careers in nice, safe offices, then none of the wonders of the world would have been discovered – the Roman ruins of Pompeii, Easter Island’s incredible statues, the beautiful Cave of Altamira! Dr Dawud Charter would never have unearthed those incredible tombs in the Valley of the Kings if he’d thought it wiser just to stay at home with a pot of Darjeeling! Séafra really needed to live life a little more bravely.

‘So what animals are we going to see, Rinthi?’ asked Taber, skipping through the grasses ahead of his sister as they picked their way towards the mill. ‘Will I get to pet a koala bear? Or a tiger?’

‘*Αwww*, I don’t think so Tabs,’ Orinthia replied with a chuckle. ‘Probably something a little less . . . exotic.’

Taber cocked his head and thought for a moment. ‘Like a zebra?’

‘Erm . . . probably not a zebra either.’

‘A monkey then? I’d *reeeeally* like to see a monkey!’

Not wanting to completely shatter her little brother’s hopes, Orinthia smiled before saying, ‘Maybe, Tabs. Let’s just wait and see, hmmm?’

Taber nodded, and with the sun warm on their backs, the pair continued down the hill and through the field.

Soon enough they were standing at the foot of the rickety wooden steps which lead up to the windmill's front porch. Orinthia craned her neck. The building had looked shabby from afar, but up close it was positively dilapidated. It was like a shrivelling pink gourd which had gone to seed – tiles were missing from the roof, the window frames were rotting and the crumbling bricks were laced together with dark green weeds.

'Let's go inside! Let's go inside!' said Taber, tugging at Orinthia's arm and obviously still eager to explore.

But just then, Orinthia heard footsteps pounding behind them.

'Hey! Wait up! Wait for me!'

Orinthia turned to find Séafra lolloping towards them through the yellow grasses, his cheeks flushed. When he was a couple of metres away he stopped, resting his hands on his knees and puffing hard.

'You changed your mind, then?' said Orinthia with a wry smile. 'Thought you might.'

'Yes,' Séafra panted, trying to catch his breath, 'but

only because there should be someone *responsible* around to keep an eye out for trouble. I don't want anything happening to Taber.'

Orinthia felt her teeth clench together. She hated the way Séafra had emphasized the word *responsible*, as if she were some reckless hothead who'd happily put their little brother in danger. But she couldn't be bothered to fight with him any more – they had a windmill to explore after all, and as the leader of this expedition she needed to keep her crew motivated. 'So, you're coming in?' she said, trying not to let her eyes betray her annoyance.

'Yes, if I must,' huffed Séafra, wiping sweat from his brow. 'But if we see anything strange – anything at all – we're leaving straight away.'

Taber's eyes lit up and he reached for his big brother's hand. '*Yaaaaay!* Rinthi said we're going to see monkeys!' He jumped around like a little chimp. 'I think we might see some penguins, too . . .'

Séafra rolled his eyes in despair, but Orinthia was already leading the way up to the front door. This, she hoped, was going to be the start of a wonderful summer.