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Opening extract from

The Nowhere Emporium

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PROLOGUE

THE SHOP FROM NOWHERE

The shop from nowhere arrived with the dawn on a crisp November morning.

Word travelled quickly around the village, and by midday the place was abuzz with rumour and hearsay.

"There were four shops in the row yesterday. Today there are five!"

"Did you hear? It sits between the butcher's and the ironmonger's…"

"The brickwork is black as midnight, and it sparkles strangely in the light!"

By evening time, a curious crowd had begun to gather around the mysterious building. They jostled for position and traded strange and wonderful theories about where the shop had come from and what it

might sell, all the while hoping to catch a glimpse of movement through the darkened windows.

The shop was indeed built from bricks the colour of midnight, bricks that shimmered and sparkled under the glow of the gas streetlamps. Blocking the doorway was a golden gate so fine and intricate that some wondrous spider might have spun it. Over the windows, curling letters spelled out a name:



There was a glimmer of movement in the entranceway, and a ripple of excitement passed through the crowd. And then silence fell – a silence so deep and heavy that it seemed to hang in the atmosphere like mist.

The shop's door swung open. The fine golden gate turned to dust, scattering in the wind.

The air was suddenly alive with a hundred scents: the perfume of toasted coconut and baking bread; of salty sea air and freshly fallen rain; of bonfires and melting ice.

A dove emerged from the darkness of the shop and soared through the air, wings flashing white in the blackness. The enchanted crowd watched as it climbed until it was lost to the night. And then, as one, they gasped. The black sky exploded with light and colour, and a message in dazzling firework sparks and shimmers spelled out:

THE NOWHERE EMPORIUM IS OPEN FOR BUSINESS.

BRING YOUR IMAGINATION...

The writing hung in the air just long enough for everyone to read it, and then the words began falling to the ground, a rain of golden light. The crowd laughed in delight, reaching out to catch the sparks as they fell.

Everybody who'd gathered outside the Emporium was entranced. No one had ever seen a spectacle such as this. One by one they walked forward, touched the sparkling black brickwork, examined the tips of their fingers. And then they stepped through the door to find out what was waiting.



Two days later, when the shop had vanished, a stranger arrived in the village. He was polite, and he paid for his room with stiff new banknotes. But something about him – his startling height perhaps, or the hungry look in his cold blue eyes – troubled the villagers.

He asked questions about a shop built from midnight bricks.

But the tall man couldn't find a single person in the village who could recall the Emporium.

Within a day he too was gone, and all trace of these strange events faded from the history of the place.

Those who'd walked through the Emporium's doors had no memory of anything they might have seen inside. More importantly, none of them recalled the price of admission – the little piece of themselves they'd given for a glimpse at the Emporium's hidden secrets and wonders.

Bring your imagination, the sign in the sky had requested.







Glasgow, present day

"Look out! Coming through!"

"Oi!"

"Watch where you're goin', wee man!"

"Sorry!"

Daniel Holmes darted through the Saturday shopping crowds in Glasgow, pushing and twisting and weaving. His lungs burned and his legs ached, but he did not stop. He couldn't stop; Spud Harper and his gang were chasing him. And everyone in the children's home knew that if Spud Harper was after you, you didn't slow down.

Daniel wheeled left at a butcher shop, almost

slipping on a blood-red puddle. He turned into a narrow street lined with old buildings housing fashion boutiques, restaurants and coffee shops. Carved stone angels and gargoyles seemed to watch the street from high above.

Daniel's head swung right to left. Where next? He wondered how far he was from the bus station. He imagined jumping on a bus headed to the coast, where he could stow away on a boat and escape from Glasgow and St Catherine's. Somewhere with no Spud Harper would be nice.

"Not crying for your dad?" Spud yelled at him from somewhere back among the crowds. "You were wailing like a baby in your sleep again last night. The whole home heard you! 'Daddy! Daddy! Don't die, Daddy!' Ha, ha! Don't worry, wee man, when we're through with you, you'll have something else to cry about!"

Spud and his gang were bigger than Daniel, and faster and stronger. Sooner or later they'd catch him. He sprinted across the street, jinked into the nearest shop and slammed the heavy door shut. He clutched at his chest and watched through the darkened glass of the door, crouching out of sight. He could hear Spud's gang shouting as they thundered past.

"Where'd he go? Where is the wee weasel?"

"Must be up here!"

Daniel's shoulders sagged. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. The air was infused with the

jumbled perfume of furniture polish and dust, and something like melting chocolate. Then he opened his eyes, and for the first time became fully aware of his surroundings.

The shop was a cave of wonders. Everywhere he looked, Daniel saw something he wanted to pick up, to hold, to have as his own. Silver and gold and crystal gleamed and sparkled in the light of a spitting fire. Intricate wooden clocks and mirrors of varying size and splendour covered the walls. Tiny fish flashed like bars of copper in a glass tank. There were porcelain dolls and wooden soldiers; rusted swords; stuffed animals; columns of books as high as the ceiling; jewels that seemed to glow with a silvery light. A stuffed polar bear sat in one corner, eyeing the shop like a watchman. Even particles of dust, caught in a bar of sunlight, seemed to glow like stars.

"How did you get in here? We're closed!"

The voice startled Daniel. In the far corner of the room stood a grand desk with feet carved like an eagle's talons. Behind the desk sat a small man in a dusty suit. His wavy brown hair was wild and tangled, falling over his handsome face. On the desk in front of the man lay a battered book. His hand hovered over an open page, clutching a fountain pen. He stared at Daniel with eyes the colour of thunderclouds.

"Sorry," said Daniel. "Didn't mean to bother you. Someone's chasing me." As he spoke, his eyes were

drawn to the book on the desk, which had begun to tremble against the dark grain of the wood, as if there was something in the pages trying to get out.

The man in the suit frowned. He glanced from Daniel to the book and back. Then he snapped the book shut, locked it away in his desk, and got up and marched past Daniel to the door.

"See?" he said, pointing to a sign hanging on the door that read CLOSED. "Closed." He tried the door handle, opened the door. "I could have sworn I locked it." He spun back to face Daniel, staring at him through narrowed eyes. "Who's after you?"

"Big boys. From my children's home."

The man raised an eyebrow.

"You are an orphan?"

Daniel nodded.

The fire snapped and cracked.

"What happened to your parents?" said the man.

Daniel thought this was an odd question for a stranger to ask, but he didn't want to be thrown back out into the street, so he answered.

"Dad was a fisherman. Died at sea. Mum only lasted a couple of years after that."

This seemed to satisfy the shopkeeper.

"And why are these big boys after you?" he said. "There must be a reason."

Daniel folded his arms. "Yeah, there is a reason. They're goons. Spud and his pals think they run the home. They

take things from the other kids – important things, like reminders of their parents and stuff. And nobody ever stands up to them. But I couldn't take it any more. I followed them. I found out where they kept their stash. I got everyone's stuff back and I explained that if the other kids stick together, Spud and his gang can't get to them. Spud didn't like that."

The little man in the dusty suit jutted out his bottom lip and nodded, disguising a smile. "Ah. Bullies. I see." He wandered around from behind his desk. "What is your name?"

"Daniel. Daniel Holmes."

"Well, Daniel Holmes, I know how it feels to live life in the shadow of a bully. We have that in common."

"Really?"

"Mmm hmm. I'll tell you what. You can wait in here until you are sure Spud and his gang are gone."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"It's no trouble," said the man in the suit. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to."

He turned and wandered towards a velvet curtain of rich, deep crimson at the back of the shop. As he reached for the curtain, he paused.

"Daniel, do you have a favourite animal?"

"Animal?" Daniel thought for a moment. "It's a bit weird," he said, "but I like magpies. People say they're the cleverest of the birds. There's a rhyme about them..."

"Ah," said the man in the suit, "one for sorrow, two for joy?"

"Aye, that's the one."

"Very good," said the shopkeeper. He smiled to himself, then said, "Well, I must be off."

"See you," said Daniel. "Hey, maybe I'll come back and buy something from you one day."

A fleeting smile crossed the man's face. "Oh, I wouldn't be too sure. Return customers are very rare in this place."

And with that he was through the curtain and away.

Daniel peered out of the window, which was tinted sepia so that the outside world looked like an old photograph. Grey Glasgow rain had begun to fall in fat drops. Puddles were already gathering on the road.

Spud Harper and his gang were long gone, but Daniel was keen to have one last look around before he left. He wandered towards a table scattered with metal toy soldiers. He picked two of the soldiers up, imagining that one was himself and the other Spud Harper, and staged a fight between the two.

Daniel's soldier was about to throw Spud off the table when something startled him, a soft, fluttering sound. He dropped the toys and stared at the red curtain to the back of the shop. Another flutter. The curtain waved gently.

He edged forward, his heart racing. When he was close enough, he reached out a trembling hand and slowly ... gently ... touched the material.

A burst of red velvet, the sound of flapping wings, and two silver birds exploded from behind the curtain. Daniel ducked and spun, and the birds flew across the store and landed on a column of stacked books.

They were magpies. But they were like no magpies Daniel had ever seen.

They were made of brilliant, gleaming silver.

Every feather, delicate as a shaving of ice, reflected the flames of the coal fire. The silver magpies fixed him with shining ruby eyes, twitched their heads to one side.

"How?" whispered Daniel, treading softly towards them, though they did not shy away as he advanced. When he was close enough, he reached out a hand. "Are you real?"

His fingers touched upon the cool silver of one of the magpie's wings. The bird let out an indignant call and flapped away, leading its twin back towards the curtain. But when they reached the rich red velvet, the birds did not fly through. Instead, they exploded with a flash, and a shower of rubies rained down on the shop floor.

Daniel's mouth hung open.

"What's going on out there?" came the shop owner's voice from behind the curtain. "What was that sound? Nothing had better be damaged!"

Suddenly unsure of exactly what he'd seen, or what kind of a place he'd stumbled upon, Daniel made for the door. A little bell sang as he dashed out into the rain and down the street.

A moment later, the short man in the dusty old suit stepped from behind the curtain. He stared around the shop. Then he leaned over and plucked two of the magpie rubies from the floor, rolling them between his thumbs and fingers. His hands closed around the stones, and when they opened once more, the magpies were sitting in his palms, brilliant silver, almost glowing in the gloom.

The man in the suit released the birds and watched as they circled the shop before settling once again on a column of books. Then he smiled a wide, clever smile, and disappeared back through the curtain.



