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Chapter I

"How's the bellyache, then?"

Gwyn stuck his head round the door. Alison sat in the iron bed with brass knobs. Porcelain columns showed the Infant Bacchus and there was a lump of slate under one leg because the floor dipped.

"A bore," said Alison. "And I'm too hot."

"Tough," said Gwyn. "I couldn't find any books, so I've brought one I had from school. I'm supposed to be reading it for Literature, but you're welcome: it looks deadly."

"Thanks anyway," said Alison.

"Roger's gone for a swim. You wanting company are you?"

"Don't put yourself out for me," said Alison.

"Right," said Gwyn. "Cheerio."

He rode sideways down the banisters on his arms to the first floor landing.

"Gwyn!"

"Yes? What's the matter? You OK?"

"Quick!"

"You want a basin? You going to throw up, are you?"

"Gwyn!"

He ran back. Alison was kneeling on the bed.

"Listen," she said. "Can you hear that?"

"That what?"

"That noise in the ceiling. Listen."

The house was quiet. Mostyn Lewis-Jones was calling after the sheep on the mountain: and something was scratching in the ceiling above the bed.

"Mice," said Gwyn.

"Too loud," said Alison.

"Rats, then."

"No. Listen. It's something hard."

"They want their claws trimming."

"It's not rats," said Alison.

"It is rats. They're on the wood: that's why they're so loud."

"I heard it the first night I came," said Alison, "and every night since: a few minutes after I'm in bed."

"That's rats," said Gwyn. "As bold as you please."

"No," said Alison. "It's something trying to get out. The scratching's a bit louder each night. And today – it's the loudest yet – and it's not there all the time."

"They must be tired by now," said Gwyn.

"Today – it's been scratching when the pain's bad. Isn't that strange?"

"You're strange," said Gwyn. He stood on the bed, and rapped the ceiling. "You up there! Buzz off!"

The bed jangled as he fell, and landed hard, and sat gaping at Alison. His knocks had been answered.

"Gwyn! Do it again!"

Gwyn stood up.

Knock, knock.

Scratch, scratch.

Knock.

Scratch.

Knock knock knock.

Scratch scratch scratch.

Knock – knock knock.

Scratch – scratch scratch.

Gwyn whistled. "Hey," he said. "These rats should be up the Grammar at Aberystwyth." He jumped off the bed. "Now where've I seen it? – I know: in the closet here."

Gwyn opened a door by the bedroom chimney. It was a narrow space like a cupboard, and there was a hatch in the ceiling.

"We need a ladder," said Gwyn.

"Can't you reach if you stand on the washbasin?" said Alison.

"Too chancy. We need a pair of steps and a hammer. The bolt's rusted in. I'll go and fetch them from the stables."

"Don't be long," said Alison. "I'm all jittery."

" 'Gwyn's Educated Rats': how's that? We'll make a packet on the telly."

He came back with the stepladder, hammer and a cage trap.

"My Mam's in the kitchen, so I couldn't get bait."

"I've some chocolate," said Alison. "It's fruit and nut: will that do?"

"Fine," said Gwyn. "Give it us here now."

He had no room to strike hard with the hammer, and rust and old paint dropped in his face.

"It's painted right over," he said. "No one's been up for years. Ah. That's it."

The bolt broke from its rust. Gwyn climbed down for Alison's torch. He wiped his face on his sleeve, and winked at her.

"That's shut their racket, anyway."

As he said this the scratching began on the door over his head, louder than before.

"You don't have to open it," said Alison.

"And say goodbye to fame and fortune?"

"Don't laugh about it. You don't have to do it for me. Gwyn, be careful. It sounds so sharp: strong and sharp."

"Who's laughing, girlie?" He brought a dry mop from the landing and placed the head against the door in the ceiling. The scratching had stopped. He pushed hard, and the door banged open. Dust sank in a cloud.

"It's light," said Gwyn. "There's a pane of glass let in the roof."

"Do be careful," said Alison.

"'Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller' – Yarawarawarawarawara!" Gwyn brandished the mop through the hole. "Nothing, see."

He climbed until his head was above the level of the joists. Alison went to the foot of the ladder.

"A lot of muck and straw. Coming?"

"No," said Alison. "I'd get hayfever in that dust. I'm allergic."

"There's a smell," said Gwyn: "a kind of scent: I can't quite – yes: it's meadowsweet. Funny, that. It must be blowing from the river. The slates feel red hot."

"Can you see what was making the noise?" said Alison.

Gwyn braced his hands on either side of the hatch and drew his legs up.

"It's only a place for the water tanks, and that," he said. "No proper floor. Wait a minute, though!"

"Where are you going? Be careful." Alison heard Gwyn move across the ceiling.

In the darkest corner of the loft a plank lay over the joists, and on it was a whole dinner service: squat towers of plates, a mound of dishes, and all covered with grime, straw, droppings and blackened pieces of birds' nests.

"What is it?" said Alison. She had come up the ladder and was holding a handkerchief to her nose.

"Plates. Masses of them."

"Are they broken?"

"Nothing wrong with them as far as I can see, except

muck. They're rather nice – green and gold shining through the straw."

"Bring one down, and we'll wash it."

Alison saw Gwyn lift a plate from the top of the nearest pile, and then he lurched, and nearly put his foot through the ceiling between the joists.

"Gwyn! Is that you?"

"Whoops!"

"Please come down."

"Right. Just a second. It's so blooming hot up here it made me go sken-eyed."

He came to the hatch and gave Alison the plate.

"I think your mother's calling you," said Alison.

Gwyn climbed down and went to the top of the stairs.

"What you want, Mam?"

"Fetch me two lettuce from the kitchen garden!" His mother's voice echoed from below. "And be sharp now!"

"I'm busy!"

"You are not!"

Gwyn pulled a face. "You clean the plate," he said to Alison. "I'll be right back." Before he went downstairs Gwyn put the cage trap into the loft and closed the hatch.

"What did you do that for? You didn't see anything, did you?" said Alison.

"No," said Gwyn. "But there's droppings. I still want to know what kind of rats it is can count."

Chapter 2

Roger splashed through the shallows to the bank. A slab of rock stood out of the ground close by him, and he sprawled backwards into the foam of meadowsweet that grew thickly round its base. He gathered the stems in his arms and pulled the milky heads down over his face to shield him from the sun.

Through the flowers he could see a jet trail moving across the sky, but the only sounds were the river and a farmer calling sheep somewhere up the valley.

The mountains were gentle in the heat. The ridge above the house, crowned with a grove of fir trees, looked black against the summer light. He breathed the cool sweet air of the flowers. He felt the sun drag deep in his limbs.

Something flew by him, a blink of dark on the leaves. It was heavy, and fast, and struck hard. He felt the vibration through the rock, and he heard a scream.

Roger was on his feet, crouching, hands wide, but the meadow was empty, and the scream was gone: he caught its echo in the farmer's distant voice and a curlew away on the mountain. There was no one in sight: his heart raced, and he

was cold in the heat of the sun. He looked at his hands. The meadowsweet had cut him, lining his palm with red beads. The flowers stank of goat.

He leant against the rock. The mountains hung over him, ready to fill the valley. "Brrr—" He rubbed his arms and legs with his fists. The skin was rough with gooseflesh. He looked up and down the river, at the water sliding like oil under the trees and breaking on the stones. "Now what the heck was that? Acoustics? Trick acoustics? And those hills – they'd addle anyone's brains." He pressed his back against the rock. "Don't you move. I'm watching you. That's better – Hello?"

There was a hole in the rock. It was round and smooth, and it went right through from one side to the other. He felt it with his hand before he saw. Has it been drilled on purpose, or is it a freak? he thought. Waste of time if it isn't natural: crafty precision job, though. "Gosh, what a fluke!" He had lined himself up with the hole to see if it was straight, and he was looking at the ridge of fir trees above the house. The hole framed the trees exactly... "Brrrr, put some clothes on."

Roger walked up through the garden from the river.

Huw Halfbacon was raking the gravel on the drive in front of the house, and talking to Gwyn, who was banging lettuces together to shake the earth from the roots.

"Lovely day for a swim," said Huw.

"Yes," said Roger. "Perfect."

"Lovely."

"Yes."

"You were swimming?" said Huw.

"That's why I'm wearing trunks," said Roger.

"It is a lovely day for that," said Huw. "Swimming."

"Yes."

"In the water," said Huw.

"I've got to get changed," said Roger.

"I'll come with you," said Gwyn. "I want to have a talk."

"That man's gaga," said Roger when they were out of hearing. "He's so far gone he's coming back."

They sat on the terrace. It was shaded by its own steepness, and below them the river shone through the trees. "Hurry up then," said Roger. "I'm cold."

"Something happened just now," said Gwyn. "There was scratching in the loft over Alison's bedroom."

"Mice," said Roger.

"That's what I said. But when I knocked to scare them away – they knocked back."

"Get off!"

"They did. So I went up to have a look. There's a pile of dirty plates up there: must be worth pounds."

"Oh? That's interesting. Have you brought them down?"

"One. Alison's cleaning it. But what about the scratching?"

"Could be anything. These plates, though: what are they like? Why were they up there?"

"I couldn't see much. I asked Huw about them."

"Well?"

"He said, 'Mind how you are looking at her.' "

"Who? Ali? What's she got to do with it?"

"Not Alison. I don't know who he meant. When I told him I'd found the plates he stopped raking for a moment and said that: 'Mind how you are looking at her.' Then you came."

"I tell you, the man's off his head. – Why's he called Halfbacon, anyway?"

"It's the Welsh: Huw Hannerhob," said Gwyn. "Huw Halfbacon: Huw the Flitch: he's called both."

"It suits him."

"It's a nickname," said Gwyn.

"What's his real name?"

"I don't think he knows. Roger? There's one more thing. I don't want you to laugh."

"OK."

"Well, when I picked up the top plate, I came over all queer. A sort of tingling in my hands, and everything went muzzy – you know how at the pictures it sometimes goes out of focus on the screen and then comes back? It was like that: only when I could see straight again, it was different somehow. Something had changed."

"Like when you're watching a person who's asleep, and they wake up," said Roger. "They don't move, nothing happens, but you know they're awake."

"That's it!" said Gwyn. "That's it! Exactly! Better than what I was trying to say! By, you're a quick one, aren't you?"

"Can you tell me anything about a rock with a hole through it down by the river?" said Roger.

"A big slab?" said Gwyn.

"Yes, just in the meadow."

"It'll be the Stone of Gronw, but I don't know why. Ask Huw. He's worked at the house all his life."

"No thanks. He'd give me the London Stockmarket Closing Report."

"What do you want to know for, anyway?" said Gwyn.

"I was sunbathing there," said Roger. "Are you coming to see how Ali's managed with your plate?"

"In a sec," said Gwyn. "I got to drop these in the kitchen for Mam. I'll see you there."

Roger changed quickly and went up to Alison. His bedroom was immediately below hers, on the first floor.

She was bending over a plate which she had balanced on her knees. The plate was covered with a sheet of paper and she was drawing something with a pencil.

"What's this Gwyn says you've found?" said Roger.

"I've nearly finished," said Alison. She kept moving the paper as she drew. "There! What do you think of that?" She was flushed.

Roger took the plate and turned it over. "No maker's

mark," he said. "Pity. I thought it might have been a real find. It's ordinary stuff: thick: not worth much."

"Thick yourself! Look at the pattern!"

"Yes. – Well?"

"Don't you see what it is?"

"An abstract design in green round the edge, touched up with a bit of rough gilding."

"Roger! You're being stupid on purpose! Look at that part. It's an owl's head."

"—Yes? I suppose it is, if you want it to be. Three leafy heads with this kind of abstract flowery business in between each one. Yes: I suppose so."

"It's not abstract," said Alison. "That's the body. If you take the design off the plate and fit it together it makes a complete owl. See. I've traced the two parts of the design, and all you do is turn the head right round till it's the other way up, and then join it to the top of the main pattern where it follows the rim of the plate. There you are. It's an owl – head, wings and all."

"So it's an owl," said Roger. "An owl that's been sat on."

"You wait," said Alison, and she began to cut round the design with a pair of scissors. When she had finished she pressed the head forward, bent and tucked in the splayed legs, curled the feet and perched the owl on the edge of her candlestick.

Roger laughed. "Yes! It is! An owl!"

It was an owl: a stylised, floral owl. The bending of its legs had curved the back, giving the body the rigid set of an owl. It glared from under heavy brows.

"No, that's really good," said Roger. "How did you think it all out – the tracing, and how to fold it?"

"I saw it as soon as I'd washed the plate," said Alison. "It was obvious."

"It was?" said Roger. "I'd never have thought of it. I like him."

"Her," said Alison.

"You can tell? OK. Her. I like her." He tapped the owl's head with the pencil, making the body rock on its perch. "Hello there!"

"Don't do that," said Alison.

"What?"

"Don't touch her."

"Are you all right?"

"Give me the pencil. I must make some more," said Alison.

"I put the lettuce by the sink," Gwyn called. "I'm going to see Alison."

"You wait, boy," said his mother. "Them lettuce need washing. I only got one pair of hands."

Gwyn slashed the roots into the pig bucket and ran water in the sink. His mother came through from the larder. She

was gathering herself to make bread. Gwyn tore the leaves off the lettuce and flounced them into the water. Neither of them spoke for a long time.

"I told you be sharp with them lettuce," said his mother. "You been back to Aber for them?"

"I was talking," said Gwyn.

"Oh?"

"To Roger."

"You was talking to Halfbacon," said his mother. "I got eyes."

"Well?"

"I told you have nothing to do with him, didn't I?"

"I only stopped for a second."

"You keep away from that old fool, you hear me? I'm telling you, boy!"

"He's not all that old," said Gwyn.

"Don't come that with me," said his mother. "You want a back hander? You can have it."

"There's slugs in this lettuce," said Gwyn.

"You was speaking Welsh, too."

"Huw doesn't manage English very clever. He can't say what he means."

"You know I won't have you speaking Welsh. I've not struggled all these years in Aber to have you talk like a labourer. I could have stayed in the valley if I'd wanted that."

"But Mam, I got to practise! It's exams next year."

"If I'd known you was going to be filled with that squit you'd never have gone the Grammar."

"Yes, Mam. You keep saying."

"What was you talking about, then?"

"I was only asking Huw if he could tell me why those plates were in the roof above Alison's room."

The silence made Gwyn look round. His mother was leaning against the baking board, one hand pressed to her thin side.

"You not been up in that roof, boy."

"Yes. Alison was – a bit bothered, so I went up, and found these plates. I didn't touch – only one. She's cleaning it."

"That Alison!" said Gwyn's mother, and made for the stairs, scraping her floury arms down her apron. Gwyn followed.

They heard Alison and Roger laughing. Gwyn's mother knocked at the bedroom door, and went in.

Alison and Roger were playing with three flimsy cut out paper models of birds. One was on the candlestick and the other two were side by side on a chair back. The plate Gwyn had brought from the loft was next to Alison's pillows and covered with scraps of paper. Alison pushed the plate behind her when Gwyn's mother came in.

"Now, Miss Alison, what's this about plates?"

"Plates, Nancy?"

"If you please."

"What plates, Nancy?"

"You know what I mean, Miss Alison. Them plates from the loft."

"What about them?"

"Where are they?"

"There's only one, Mam," said Gwyn.

"Gwyn!" said Alison.

"I'll trouble you to give me that plate, Miss."

"Why?"

"You had no right to go up there."

"I didn't go."

"Nor to send my boy up, neither."

"I didn't send him."

"Excuse me," said Roger. "I've things to do." He ducked out of the room.

"I'll thank you not to waste my time, Miss Alison. Please to give me that plate."

"Nancy, you're hissing like an old goose."

"Please to give me that plate, Miss Alison."

"Whose house is this, anyway?" said Alison.

Gwyn's mother drew herself up. She went over to the bed and held out her hand. "If you please. I seen where you put it under your pillow."

Alison sat stiffly in the bed. Gwyn thought that she was going to order his mother from the room. But she reached behind her and pulled out the plate, and threw it on the bed.

Gwyn's mother took it. It was a plain white plate, without decoration.

"Very well, Miss Alison. Ve-ry well!"

Nancy went from the room with the plate in her hand. Gwyn stood at the door and gave a silent whistle.

"You ever played Find the Lady, have you?" he said. "'Now you see it, now you don't.' Who taught you that one, girlie?"