

CHAPTER ONE

JAMES SMITH & SONS UMBRELLA SHOP, LONDON, 1944

The grandfather clock had just struck five when Pip Hanway saw Mr and Mrs Smith for the last time. Watching them closely, with her whiskers twitching on her cheeks, she peered out from under her umbrella canopy and tightened her tail around the end of one of its metal ribs, hoping more customers would soon visit the shop to tell more stories of the far-flung places she dreamed to see.

Mr Smith was standing behind the long mahogany counter, smiling at his wife as she dusted the umbrellas in the shop window. She fluttered from one umbrella to the next as the June sunlight poured inside, all the time having no idea that a small family of mice were secretly living inside her precious antique umbrella, occupying

pride of place at the front of the display.

It had once belonged to the first man to use an umbrella in London, Jonas Hanway. His great-nephew donated it to the first James Smith over a hundred years before, and when Pip's father's family moved into the building shortly afterwards, they made the Hanway umbrella their home. They became the first English umbrella mice, so proud of their house and its owner that they named themselves after Jonas Hanway himself.

Nevertheless, if Mrs Smith had known they were there, Pip thought with a giggle that crinkled the fur on her nose, she would have pulled up her skirt around her knees, climbed on top of the shop counter and screeched like a kettle bubbling on the stove.

Pip and every other Hanway mouse before her had passed their days in the same way. As the red buses rumbled past the shop on Bloomsbury Street, Pip and her parents secretly nestled together, high up inside their umbrella where it was safe and dark, and when they weren't sleeping, watched customers come inside James Smith & Sons to buy Mr Smith's handmade umbrellas. The shop was always busy, despite the country being at war for the last five years.

‘As long as there’s rain, there’s business!’ Mr Smith would say, even when there was not a cloud in the sky.

‘If we go back to Gignese in the summer we might melt like the ice cream,’ Mrs Smith was saying for the second time that day.



‘And you know how Peter hates feeling too hot.’

She had spoken about Gignese every breakfast, lunch and supper since their son Peter was sent to fight in Normandy three weeks before. The little Italian town had the only umbrella museum in the world and Mr and Mrs Smith had been planning to take the Hanway umbrella there for years to organize a special exhibition with the owner of the museum. When Peter came home at the end of the war, they were all going on holiday to see the museum again, high up in the northern Italian

hills where they would eat vibrant food one could only dream of in wartime.

Pip grinned mischievously. Mr and Mrs Smith didn't know that the Hanway mice were joining them. It was going to be the first time Pip would meet her Italian aunts, uncles and cousins, who her mother had left behind on her own adventure to see the world. She had stowed away inside an antique lace parasol Mrs Smith had bought for her historical display inside the shop, and it was love at first sight when she arrived and bumped into Papa late one night, nibbling crumbs behind the kitchen bread bin.

'Did you hear that, Papa?' Pip squeaked excitedly. 'Ice cream!'

'Shhh!' Mama and Papa scolded from their nest of fluff and old newspaper, cleverly tucked away behind the top notch at the highest point inside the umbrella canopy.

And Pip knew why.

Many Hanway mice had been snapped in a trap, including their last surviving relative, Great-Aunt Marble, who was as round as a ball and could never resist one last bite of biscuit in the upstairs tea cupboard. Mrs Smith's ears were as sharp as a bat's and if she thought she heard the tiniest of squeaks, traps would be hidden throughout

the shop and the flat above. But Pip didn't care how noisy she was. She'd never be stupid enough to end up like greedy Aunt Marble. Besides, ice cream and Peter were the best things she'd heard all day, especially after eating another dry crust of Mrs Smith's wartime loaf of bread.

The truth was that she missed Peter as much as Mr and Mrs Smith did, even if she had been scared he was going to kill her at first. The first time they met was late one night when she was secretly in his bedroom with her friends Dot and Joe, two black and white mice from the pub next door. Peter never would have known they were there if those two nitwits hadn't started bickering over who was the fastest mouse. When they knocked over a photo frame on Peter's bedside table, it crashed loudly on to the floor and suddenly he was wide awake, sitting bolt upright in bed.

At once, Pip had darted across the floor, knowing that if she didn't outrun him she would certainly die a horrible death. But Peter had been fast on his feet as he chased her downstairs to the shop. He was at her heels when she sprinted up the umbrella pole to safety, curling up beside her parents, who had still been fast asleep in their nest at the top of the canopy. Pip had trembled with terror at that moment, feeling sure she had led a

monster straight to her family. But instead of hurting her, Peter had simply turned around and gone back to bed. Soon after, he started leaving crumbs under the umbrella when Mr and Mrs Smith weren't looking. Pip was always the first to find them, so her parents never suspected that Peter knew where they lived.

The last time Pip had seen Peter was the morning he had left to go to war, when he rescued her from the deep kitchen sink. She had slipped inside it and, hearing him come into the room, Dot and Joe had panicked and left her behind. He had gently cradled her in the palm of his hand and stroked her white underbelly before carefully putting her back beneath her umbrella. But Pip could never tell Mama and Papa about her adventure. Then they'd know she'd been sneaking out of the umbrella to explore while they slept.

'And we can't possibly leave the shop to go to Gignese in the autumn or spring – they're our busiest months,' Mrs Smith continued. 'And business is good in winter too, especially around Christmas.'

'When the war is over and Peter comes home,' Mr Smith said softly, walking to her and placing his arm around her shoulders. 'He won't mind what time of year we go.'

His voice had quivered with sadness, and he stopped to clear his throat before continuing. The truth was that even if Peter did find his way home, he would no longer be the same boy Mr and Mrs Smith knew. He was a man they could not protect from the cruelty of war, and those men didn't often go on holiday with their parents.

'And he'll be home soon, love,' Mr Smith said, tenderly kissing Mrs Smith's forehead, her eyes at once filling with tears. 'I can feel it in my bones.'

A knot of worry tightened in Pip's stomach. For the last three weeks, everyone who came into the shop had been talking about the D-Day landings in Normandy and how many thousands of soldiers had died in the battle there.

A brass bell jingled loudly as the front door to James Smith & Sons swung open and a young woman with brown hair tied back with a green ribbon stepped inside.

'Bedtime soon, Miss Pip,' Mama said from high up inside the umbrella. Pip's tail flicked irritably as she glanced up to see her mother busily fluffing their nest with her paws, 'It's late.'

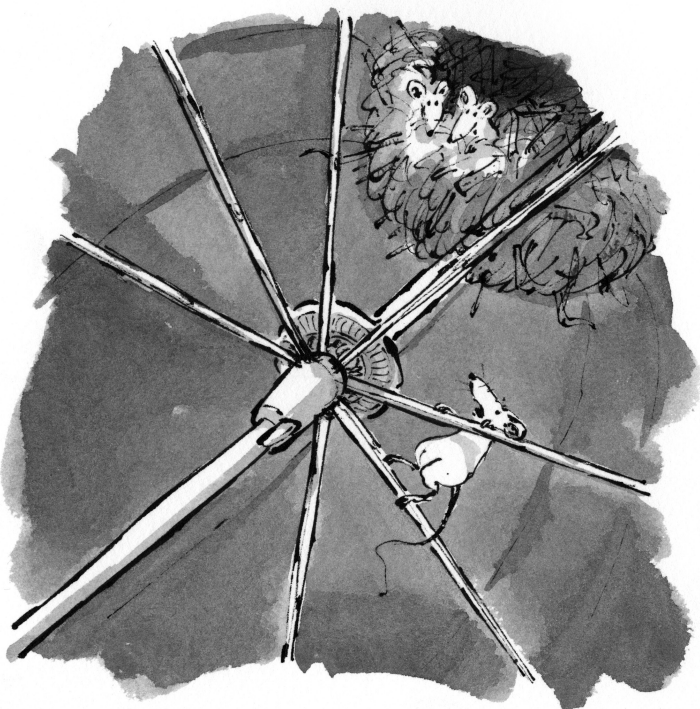
'But Mama, I just want to see who this customer is.'

‘All right, one more customer and I want no arguments when they leave.’

Why is it, Pip thought with a frustrated sigh, that those few extra minutes before I’m meant to be in bed are always the most fun and quick to pass? She hoped this girl was interesting and stayed a while.

‘Good morning,’ Mrs Smith said, approaching the young woman across the shop floor. ‘Can I help you?’

‘Hello,’ she said, closing the door behind her with a final rattle from the bell. She smiled warmly. ‘Yes, I would like to buy my father a birthday present.’



‘We have a number of gentleman’s umbrellas here, do you think he would like a solid stick?’ Mrs Smith said, pointing to a plain wooden-handled umbrella in a nearby display. ‘Or a carved one? We have all sorts of animal heads if you think he would like one of these?’

‘How lovely,’ the young woman said, looking delighted as she touched a tiger’s head snarling from a timber handle. ‘I think he’d like that. We used to go to the zoo all the time in Berlin.’

‘Berlin? Goodness, are you a refugee? I never would have guessed. Your accent sounds completely English.’

‘Yes, we had to leave Germany in 1933, when I was nine years old. If we had waited a day longer, the Gestapo would have arrested us.’

‘Your family must have been terrified.’

‘Yes, we were,’ she said solemnly. ‘My father is still on their blacklist for speaking out against the Nazi Party in the newspaper he used to write for. We escaped on the train and stayed in Switzerland and Paris before we arrived here in 1935.’ She smiled to herself. ‘It’s funny. I must have lost my accent in the last nine years, although I have never forgotten my German or French.’ She paused and shook her head sadly. ‘We were very lucky. After all the terrible things that have happened in my

home country, I can't imagine ever living there again. I think England is where I belong now.'

'And you're very welcome here, my dear,' Mr Smith said with a kind nod of his head.

'So is your father,' Mrs Smith said, nodding too. 'And as an honorary Englishman he really must have an umbrella. I'm afraid he may never get used to the cold and damp weather we have here, but a fine shelter from the rain will help.'

'You should try the winter in Berlin!' She laughed, turning back to the carved umbrella handles, her eyes narrowing slightly as she made her decision. 'I think he'd like that one with a mouse carving,' she said, pointing to it. 'It's his nickname for me, and he's always trying to catch them and set them free in the park.'

Pip let out a muffled squeak of joy. She always liked it when people picked the mice umbrellas.

'Very good choice,' Mrs Smith said. 'Shall I wrap it for you?'

'Yes, please.'

'Follow me,' she said, leading her to the far end of the shop's long mahogany counter. 'Which wrapping paper do you think your father would like?'

Behind them, the front door jangled open again as

another customer arrived and closed the door behind him. Recognizing the man taking off his fedora hat, Mr Smith briskly approached him while Mrs Smith chatted to the woman on the other side of the shop.

‘Papa!’ Pip cried with excitement, immediately remembering the man’s stern, unremarkable face.

‘Shhhh! Pip, for whiskers’ sake!’ Mama said.

‘It’s the spy man!’ she whispered as loudly as she could. ‘He must have come to collect the umbrellas we found in the downstairs workshop!’

‘Let me have a look,’ Papa said, eyes twinkling with enthusiasm.

Hastily clambering out of their nest and down the pole of the Hanway umbrella, Papa expertly hopped and jumped along its metal stretchers to meet Pip, wrapping his tail around the end of one of its metal ribs to peer out from under the canopy on to shop floor.

‘It’s a pleasure to see you again, sir,’ Mr Smith said, warmly shaking the man’s hand. ‘Please wait here, I’ll be back with your order in a moment.’

Mr Smith turned away and stepped behind the shop counter. As he disappeared through a swinging door that led to the downstairs workshop, the man patiently waited under the shop’s butter-coloured signs. His eyes

drifted over big Victorian lettering, which read 'James Smith & Sons Umbrellas', and the framed black and white photographs of Mr and Mrs Smith and their umbrella-manufacturing ancestors, proudly hanging on the wall behind the shop counter.

'It's definitely him,' Pip said, speaking rapidly.

She had been hoping to see this man again. There wasn't another customer like him. He had been in the shop a month ago and quietly given Mr Smith technical drawings to build three special umbrellas that Pip and her parents had then searched for in the downstairs workshop. Each had something very secret woven into its design. One handle separated from its umbrella pole to reveal a hidden blade of a sword, another had a pull-out poison bottle camouflaged in the hook, while the last umbrella had a secret button concealed in the ear of a carved-wood dog handle that burst its canopy open.

'You're right!' Papa whispered with a grin that creased the fur around his eyes. 'He'll be a member of Churchill's Secret Army, fighting to defeat the Axis Powers – only the very bravest souls survive. Most of the time, nobody knows who they are – they could be anyone from Peter to Father Christmas – and he'll be giving his special umbrellas to secret agents in Europe, probably the

French Resistance. Although a hidden button in an umbrella handle isn't that special, we have one on ours, look!' He proudly pointed a paw to one of the fig leaves carved into their umbrella handle. 'The King of Persia gave this to Jonas Hanway when he was on his travels there. It's very special to have a silver handle inlaid with gold, like ours.'

'Yes, yes, I know,' Pip interrupted, sullenly rolling her eyes with boredom. The last thing she felt like was the same old history lesson from Papa. 'Jonas Hanway the traveller and the charity man that built the hospitals, who was the first man to use an umbrella in London,' she said, huffily predicting what he was going to say. 'You've told me about him a million times. Mr and Mrs Smith waffle on about him every chance they get as well.'

'Knowing how you got your name and your home is no boring matter, young Pip,' Papa said angrily, his whiskers drooping with hurt. 'Your great-great-great-great-great-grandfather took Hanway for our family name because he admired Jonas Hanway for all the kindness he showed to those worse off than him. That's something to be proud of. Furthermore, this umbrella is one of the first to be used in England. Just think how

common they are now! You live in a piece of history! Not only that – your family has been inside this umbrella since James Smith & Sons Umbrella Shop was built over a hundred years ago. That’s rare, my girl.’

‘I know how important our home is Papa!’ she snapped, her hackles bristling with impatience. ‘You tell me the same stupid story all the time!’

‘Right. Enough of that temper, Pip!’ Mama said firmly, standing by their nest with her paws on her hips. ‘You’re tired. It’s time for bed now.’

‘Just one more minute, Mama,’ she protested, craning her neck to see Mr Smith hand the man a long parcel wrapped in brown paper, tied with string.

After shaking Mr Smith’s hand, the man turned to the shop’s front door. Pulling it towards him with a clang from the bell, he paused to hold it open for the young woman, smiling gratefully as she passed through it with her father’s birthday present tucked under her arm. After giving a brief, official-looking nod, the man put his fedora hat back on his head, stepped into the sunshine and faded into the endless crowd walking up and down Bloomsbury Street.

‘No,’ Mama said. ‘The shop will still be here tonight when it’s safe for us to go outside.’

‘But there won’t be any customers.’

‘They’ll come again tomorrow morning. You can listen to more of their stories then.’

‘Come on, madam,’ Papa said in a tone that Pip knew was pointless to argue with. Besides, all the customers had left now and she couldn’t think of another excuse to stay up longer. The shop would be closing soon. ‘Off we go.’

Hopping from one metal umbrella stretcher to another, they scaled the pole to their nest. Pip yawned loudly, knowing that if she behaved now, Mama and Papa would never suspect her of sneaking out of the umbrella once they were asleep. Then she’d be free to listen to whomever she liked and explore whatever part of James Smith & Sons Umbrella Shop she wanted, so long as she stayed out of sight. She smiled to herself excitedly as she curled into a little ball beside them and



rested one of her big ears against Mama's soft, furry chest. Pip was soon asleep, but years of practice meant she was wide awake again a few hours later. She listened to the even, fluttering thud of her mother's heartbeat, and waited for the gentle rumble of her parents' snores, before she silently sneaked back down the umbrella pole to watch the customers come into the shop once more.

The grandfather clock clunked mechanically, as if it was clearing its throat, and Mrs Smith glanced at its handsome brass face as its familiar melody began to strike five o'clock. It was just before it finished playing the Westminster Chimes that it happened. As if from nowhere, a terrible crash thundered through the shop, and nothing was ever the same again.