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Thank you!

Stranger Days on Peculiar Hill

written by

Grimly Darkwood



Cover Illustration by Pete Lyon

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Cover illustration by Pete Lyon

PLAUDITS FOR THE SHOP ON PECULIAR HILL

A riotously imaginative feast of fantastical adventure with lashings of larger-than-life characters and curious goings-on.... The whimsical, jaunty language and characterization make it marvelous for reading aloud... Brilliantly bonkers, this perfectly peculiar page-turner comes heartily recommended for fans of Mr. Gum and Philip Ardagh.

Joanne Owen, lovereading4kids

This book has it all - death, darkness, fearsome creatures, strange vegetables - everything needed to brew up a fantastical tale... The author has written the characters very well, so clearly that you can picture them in your mind - kind of like watching a Harry Potter movie.

Anne-Marie Reynolds, Readers' Favorite

1
Fluffy Clouds

The sun shone over the Vale of Strange and multi-coloured bogeys flew out of a sky full of fluffy clouds. Close at hand, a man and a woman and two children picked their way between cute little bouncing heeble-greebs, smiling as they waved at the monsters all around.

"It isn't like that really of course."

Peter looked up from the picture in the book he was reading to see the pale face and piercing eyes of Amanda Chubb looking down at him.

"But then you'd know that, wouldn't you?" Amanda said. "You've been there yourself, haven't you?"

Peter grimaced.

Yes, he reflected, he had been to The Vale of Strange all right, all thanks to this girl Amanda. And thanks to Amanda they had both almost never come home.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, rather coldly.

Amanda glanced to either side. "As far as I can tell," she said, "this seems to be a public library. I've as much right to be here as anybody else. What are *you* doing here?"

"Reading about the Vale of Strange," said Peter. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

Amanda shook her head disdainfully.

"You won't find out much about it from that book," she told him. "That's a government book. That's what they give the tourists. That book tells them the Vale of Strange is full of cute little monsters and fluffy clouds and perfectly safe for the whole family. But you and I know it's not really like that, don't we?"

Peter thought back to the time he and Amanda had spent in the vale: the bogeys swarming out of the sky to attack them, the sharp-

toothed heeble-greebs rolling out of the long grass to snap at their heels, and the jamjam plant which trapped him in its feelers and covered him all over in something which looked like strawberry jam but was more like acid. No, it wasn't like it said in the book.

"But this is the only book in the library about the vale," he protested. "They told me so."

"Well they would tell you that, wouldn't they?" said Amanda. "It doesn't mean to say it's true."

"But why would they lie?"

"The same reason people always lie. Because it suits them."

Peter rolled his eyes. Amanda had a habit of saying something that sounded clever but avoided telling you what you really wanted to know.

"What I was wanting to ask was—" he began in exasperation.

"Look, it's perfectly simple," said Amanda. "They told you they don't have any more books because you don't have a resident's permit. As far as they're concerned, you might as well be a tourist."

"A resident's permit," said Peter. "What's one of those?"

"It's to show that you live here in Peculiarshire of course."

"But I do live here," Peter protested. He lived at the shop nearby on Peculiar Hill with his Uncle Bob and Aunt Maggie, who had taken him in when his parents had been kidnapped by pirates and eaten by tigers. The overseers of children had decided that Peculiar Hill would be safer than his old home on crocodile-infested Evil Island but after his first weeks here, Peter wasn't so sure. With crocodiles, you knew where you were, but things were not so predictable here on Peculiar Hill. It was close to the Vale of Strange itself, so flying bogeys and sharp-toothed heeble-greebs were never far away and anything could turn strange at any moment. It took some getting used to.

Even so, this was young Peter's home for the time being.

"How do I get one of these resident's permits?" he asked.

"You haven't been living here long enough yet," said Amanda. "You've got to have lived here over a year, and even then, it helps if you know the right people. They've got to be convinced that you can be trusted, you see. That you won't blurt out the truth about the vale to the tourists."

"Oh," said Peter. This didn't sound encouraging.

Amanda grinned. "So there's not much chance of you ever getting one, is there? Not if you live here for fifty years."

Peter could see her point. He didn't like the way they did things here in Peculiarshire, encouraging tourists to come to the Vale of Strange without telling them what a dangerous place it was. He had tried to warn some already, which – in a roundabout way – was how he had come to visit the vale himself.

"Of course," said Amanda, "there's another way of finding out more about the Vale of Strange, isn't there?"

"Oh," said Peter. "What's that?"

Amanda gave a snort of exasperation. "It's pretty obvious really," she said. "Just go back there yourself."

"Oh no," said Peter. "I've already told you. I'm not going back."

"But it would be fun," said Amanda. "We could take some sandwiches again and eat them on those bubbling boulders. I could show you all the bits you haven't seen yet."

"Yes," said Peter, "but it won't seem so much like fun if we both get killed by bogeys or eaten by a jamjam plant."

"You always look on the black side," Amanda protested. "We didn't get killed last time, now did we?"

"Only because of Mr. Grimble's exploding carrots."

"And my unctuous splodger," said Amanda, "and, though it pains me to say it, your bazooka full of heeble-greebs."

"We were lucky," said Peter. "We may not be so lucky next time."

"But—"

"Read my lips," said Peter. "I'm not going back there."

"Hmm." Amanda sat down at the desk beside Peter and rested her head in her hands. "Am I supposed to take that as a 'no' then?"

"Yes," said Peter. "I mean *no*. I mean—"

"So, tell me something," Amanda asked, "if you don't want to go back to the vale, why are you so keen on reading about it?"

"That's none of your business," said Peter.

"Do you want to know more about the vale so you can pass it all on to the tourists? To make sure they're properly scared? Is that it?"

"No," said Peter. "Not really."

"Well, what is it then?"

"It's like I said, it's none of your business."

"But I could make it my business," Amanda told him.

"How do you mean?"

"We could do a deal," said Amanda. "I've come here to get out a book for my mother, some kind of cookbook using vegetable juice, but I've also got an additional library ticket..."

Peter slowly brightened. "You mean...?"

"I mean I can use my resident's permit to get out a decent book on the Vale of Strange."

"Would you? Would you really?"

"But there's an *if*," said Amanda.

Peter had a sudden sinking feeling. "Oh yes, and what's that?"

"I'll get the book," said Amanda, "if you tell me why you want it."

2
Strange Sounds in the Broom Cupboard

Peter thought about what Amanda had said. He wasn't at all sure if he could trust her, but he definitely wanted that book.

"All right," he said eventually. "It's a deal. If you get the book out, I'll tell you why I want it. But you'll have to get it out before I tell you. Don't do a lifkin on me."

He was thinking back to one of the creatures they had met in the Vale of Strange, a wiry, two-legged furry thing called a lifkin which had almost got them both killed by sticking very rigidly to an agreement.

Amanda gave a funny kind of smile. "It's all right. I won't do a lifkin, I promise. But I'd better find my mother's book first. Won't be a moment." She got to her feet and went across to the cookery shelves, leaving Peter to leaf through the government book on the vale.

The next page had a picture of a smiling child holding a heeble-greeb in his bare hands. Heeble-greebs were round little creatures which rolled out of the long grass and bit you in the legs with their sharp little teeth – unless you were wearing sturdy boots, which everyone who lived in Peculiarshire always did all of the time (just in case). You would no sooner pick a heeble-greeb up without wearing sturdy gloves than you would pick up a beehive without wearing a beekeeper's suit.

Peter shook his head. Whoever had drawn that picture had obviously never encountered a real heeble-greeb. This book was nonsense. As Amanda had said, it was just a government book to attract tourists to the vale, to fool them into thinking the place was safe.

"That didn't take long," said Peter when Amanda returned with two large books. The top one had a picture on the cover of smiling people sitting in a circle eating vegetables.

"This one was easy to find," said Amanda. "My mother described it precisely. She doesn't want to read it and she certainly doesn't want to make the food. But she hopes that some health might rub off on her if she stares long enough at the cover."

"Wow," said Peter. "Is that how it works in Peculiarshire?"

"No," said Amanda, "but don't tell her that. And this other book was easy to find as well," she continued. "I've taken it out before. It's the best guide to the vale in my opinion."

This one was a big red book with a picture on the cover of a fierce flying bogey baring its teeth.

Peter nodded. This was more like it.

"Pass it over," he said.

"No," said Amanda, wrapping her arms around the book protectively.

Peter narrowed his eyes. "Are you doing a lifkin after all?"

"No," said Amanda. "The deal was that you would tell me why you wanted it. You haven't told me yet. No explanation, no book."

"Oh, all right," said Peter. "I want to find out more about the vale so I can work out a way to stop it happening."

"Stop what happening?"

"What happens to the tourists, the way they're fooled into coming to the Vale of Strange. The way they're told it's safe when it isn't."

Amanda raised her eyes to the ceiling and gave a pronounced sigh.

"You're not still going on about that, are you?" she said. "Still trying to save the world."

"But it isn't right," said Peter.

"I think you may have mentioned your opinion before," said Amanda, "but you know there's no way round it. The tourists have

to come to the vale to counteract the strangeness. Otherwise the strangeness would spread all over Peculiarshire and beyond. Even the places the tourists come from would be affected. They wouldn't like it either. It's really best for everyone the way it works."

"But the tourists get killed in the Vale of Strange. They get killed by the monsters."

"Only some of them."

"Some's too many as far as I'm concerned."

"So what would you do? Just let the strangeness spread?"

"I'm not convinced that would be so bad," said Peter. "But even so, I bet there's other ways to stop the strangeness spreading. We just have to think of them."

"We?" said Amanda. "I'm not wasting my brainpower on that. You can work it out for yourself. People have thought about it before, you know. They've tried things. But they haven't found anything that works."

This was news to Peter. "Oh? What have they tried?"

"All sorts of things," said Amanda. "They used helicopters to spread green algae to soak up the strangeness, but the algae just got strange as well. It spread all over Peculiarshire and made strange popping noises that kept people awake at night. There was an awful lot of bother and the mayor got very embarrassed and had to resign."

"What else did they try?"

"There was the giant vacuum cleaner and the lake of chicken soup and the monster-size high pressure hose. The district got windswept and flooded and knee deep in broth but was still just as strange as ever. They got through an awful lot of mayors that year, I can tell you."

Peter started to feel sad. He wondered if Amanda was right and it was hopeless after all. But he wasn't going to give up so easily.

"I'm still going to try and come up with something," he said.

"All right, suit yourself, but they've been through it all before. Nothing controls strangeness the way we humans do."

"At least I have the book now. At least I'm in with a chance."

"Er, yes," said Amanda suddenly putting her arms round the book and hugging it to her again.

Peter did not like the look of this. "Give me the book please, Amanda."

"Actually, I think I'll just hold on to it a little longer if you don't mind."

Peter's cheeks burned. "Come on, Amanda. We had a deal."

"That's right," said Amanda. "I said I would get out a good book on the vale if you told me what you wanted it for."

"Yes..."

"I said I would get the book out. I didn't say anything about giving it to you."

Peter was furious. "You *have* done a lifkin," he protested. "You promised you wouldn't."

"I haven't done a lifkin," said Amanda, looking very pleased with herself. "I've done an Amanda. It's the same thing but with more style."

Peter was not amused.

"I don't see how this helps you," he said. "You said you didn't want to work this problem about the strangeness out for yourself, but now you've stopped me having the book, you're going to have to."

"No," said Amanda. "*You* can work on the problem. But when you need to know something about the vale, tell me what it is and I'll look it up and read it out to you."

Peter was puzzled. "And that helps you how exactly?"

"It's a bit of fun," said Amanda. "Until I think of another game."

"I could almost think you enjoyed my company," said Peter.

Amanda seemed to turn a little pink. "Don't flatter yourself," she told him dismissively.

Chingggggg... Chingggggg...

Their attention was drawn to the library clock as it chimed two.

Amanda looked a little relieved at the interruption, but Peter leapt to his feet in a panic.

"Oh no," he exclaimed. "I'm supposed to be meeting Uncle Bob at the shop at two o'clock. I'm supposed to be helping him with some work."

"We'd better leave then," Amanda replied. "Can you take my mother's book? It isn't fair if I have to carry both of them."

Peter gave a splutter. "What a cheek. You've only got both books because—"

"Do what I say," said Amanda, "or I'll take your precious Vale of Strange book back to the desk and say I don't want it after all."

"You just like to boss me around, don't you?" said Peter. "That's what it is."

"Be quiet and carry the book." Amanda strode towards the door, still hugging the Vale of Strange book closely. Peter was left with no choice but to pick up the cookery book and follow on behind, muttering angrily to himself.

Then Amanda stopped up short.

"What's that noise?"

There was indeed a strange clattering noise from nearby. They looked around, trying to identify where it was coming from.

"Look, I'd better get on," said Peter. "Uncle Bob's expecting me."

But now the clattering was accompanied by what seemed to be muffled cries for help.

"Someone's in trouble," Amanda said. "We ought to try to help them."

"But where's it coming from?"

"It's from in there. Look!"

She was pointing to a door marked 'Private' near the library entranceway.

"Come on," she said.

"You can't go in there, Amanda," said Peter. "It says–"

Amanda opened the door.

On the other side was a walk-in cupboard with a collection of brooms and ladders which seemed to be doing a dance.

Peter wondered if these were strange brooms and ladders. Inexplicable dancing was the sort of thing strange things did. But then some brooms fell forward out of the door, revealing a tall thin man with a long brown raincoat and a pair of binoculars round his neck.

He looked at the children in some confusion.

"Is this the library?" he asked.

"Yes," said Amanda. "Were you trapped in there for long?"

The man glanced back at the cupboard.

"No, not long," he said. "Only a matter of days, nothing really. I was once trapped in a toilet in the Amazon Basin for several weeks." He glowed as he spoke, as though this was a source of pride. "Anyway, I must be getting along. Don't let me keep you."

"All right, er, thank you," muttered Peter.

"Don't go thanking him," whispered Amanda. "He should have thanked us for letting him out. It was very rude of him not to."

"Oh, just one thing," said the man, who had been heading away but now turned back. "Would you be so good as to direct me to the section of the library on the Vale of Strange?"

"Ah," began Peter, "well—"

"It's over there," said Amanda, "next to geography."

"Ah yes," said the man, "I see it now." He headed off with confidence in the wrong direction.

"He's heading for the section on geometry," said Peter. "Shall I go and help him?"

"Why would you want to do that?" asked Amanda. "I thought you were all for keeping people away from the Vale of Strange."

"Well, yes," said Peter, "but he looks so lost."

"He'll be a lot more lost than that if he ever makes it as far as the vale," said Amanda. "I've seen a better sense of direction in a bottle of ketchup. Come on, I thought you were late."

"Perhaps we should have told him about the resident's permit," said Peter. "Then he can get some decent books on the vale and they'll scare him out of going."

They were leaving the library now and Amanda raised her eyes to the glowering Peculiarshire sky.

The library was a little way from the lower end of Peculiar Hill, at the edge of Peculiar Park with its edible climbing frames and especially crazy golf. They could vaguely hear the screeching of the flowers.

"You're always worrying about other people," Amanda said, "as if it's your job to save the world."

Well if I don't do it, nobody else will, thought Peter. People round there didn't seem to notice when things weren't organised properly, like inviting tourists to come to the vale instead of finding some other way to deal with the strangeness. Everyone seemed to leave it to Peter to sort things out.

"You don't need to worry about that man," said Amanda as they reached the foot of Peculiar Hill and began to climb. "I know he looks clueless but on further reflection, I think he can take care of himself."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because of what he does for a living," said Amanda,

Peter was nonplussed. "What does he do and how do you know anyway?"

"The chances are you'll find out soon enough," said Amanda dismissively. "Now what do you want me to read about in this book we borrowed?"

Peter felt annoyed. He didn't like it when Amanda kept things to herself, which she sometimes seemed to do just to feel superior. He

was about to argue but then he saw some heeble-greebs in the long grass at the side of the road. He was very relieved that he had his sturdy boots on.

"Look up heeble-greebs, advanced defence," he told Amanda thoughtfully.

She gave a smile and a nod. "You're starting to get the hang of living round here."

3
The Searcher Calls

When they reached the shop on Peculiar Hill, Uncle Bob was out in the street, pacing up and down. Peter was scared he was in for a telling off.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Uncle," he said, handing the cookery book to Amanda who headed off up the street to her home at the Strange Hotel.

But Peter's uncle didn't seem to have noticed the boy was late. He was pacing up and down about something else.

"The angulator's gone missing," he said, "and we need it to do the work at the big old house."

Peter asked him what an angulator was. Was it something for fighting bogeys, he wondered? Most of the things on Peculiar Hill that Peter had never seen before were for fighting the creatures that lived in the Vale of Strange. They were things like unge and glop and unctuous splodger.

"Yes," said Uncle Bob, "you can use it for fighting, all right, but it's mainly used for locating strangeness. It measures the AOS, the angle of strangeness. That's why it's called an angulator. It's one of the finest instruments ever developed in my opinion. And I should know. I invented it myself."

"How does it work?" asked Peter, very impressed.

"I'll explain later." Uncle Bob nervously wiped away the sweat that coursed down his forehead. "The first thing to do is to find the blessed thing. The funny thing is the Searcher's here and even he can't find it."

Peter gave a deep sigh. There were so many things he didn't understand on Peculiar Hill.

"What's a Searcher, Uncle?"

Uncle Bob looked surprised. "You don't know what a Searcher is? He's a man that comes and finds all the things you've lost down the side of the chair and under the carpet, that sort of thing. He comes round a few times a year. It's a bit like having your chimney swept and your ears cleared out. Didn't they have Searchers on Evil Island? How did you manage?"

Peter replied that if you lost something on Evil Island, it ended up in a crocodile.

"Oh," said Uncle Bob thoughtfully. "I suppose that keeps things simple then."

"Mr. Arkenthrob," came a voice from inside the shop.

"Ah, that's the Searcher now," said Uncle Bob, brightening. "Perhaps he's found the angulator."

He and Peter went into the shop and through to the parlour beyond. Peter almost jumped out of his sturdy boots when he saw the Searcher. The man was covered in an orange overall with a matching hood and a pair of enormous protruding glass eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Arkenthrob," said the Searcher. "I've not located the angulator. I've found the remains of twenty-three cheese and pickle sandwiches, five with extra mayonnaise, down the side of the armchair, but there's no sign of your instrument, I'm afraid. The only place left to search now is the study."

A new stream of perspiration gushed down Uncle Bob's forehead and dripped off the end of his nose.

He didn't like people going up in his study.

"Well," he said, "I suppose, if there's nowhere else left to look—"

"Mind you," said the Searcher, "I've been in your study once before. I'll have to charge you extra. It's heavy duty."

"Well," said Uncle Bob, wiping the sweat with his handkerchief and wringing it out on the parlour carpet, "I suppose I can understand that. There's a lot of stuff gets lost up there. I've never been known for my tidiness and I don't suppose the strange vegetables help very much."

"That's very true, Mr. Arkenthrob," said the Searcher. "Too much of that sort of stuff can set up a vortex of forgetfulness and then you're really in trouble. It's like watching water go down a plughole, only the plughole goes down the plughole as well if you see what I mean. But let's hope it's not as bad as that in your study, not if you're hoping to find that angulator of yours. Now where did you hide your study again? Behind that bookcase, is it?"

As he climbed the stairs up to the study, the Searcher's face was grim. Uncle Bob could scarcely bear to watch. He didn't like people going up in his study at the best of times – and this was not the best of times.

"Why's he look like that?" Peter whispered.

"Eh?" said Uncle Bob. "Look like what? The Searcher, you mean? They always look like that. That's their uniform."

"Why's he got bulging eyes like a fly?"

"That's what gives them x-ray vision," said Uncle Bob, "so they can see things through things. That's their special talent. They have to study for years to be able to do it. They can spot a packet of crisps under an elephant."

"Oh, dearie me," came the doleful voice of the Searcher. He had reached the top of the stairs now and was peering into the study. He didn't like what he saw. He brought out a long pole which made a whooping sound. "It's sounding a ten on the lost-ometer," he told them. "This could take a while."

Uncle Bob began to make nervous squeaking sounds.

"Is that those mice back again?" called Peter's Aunt Maggie, who came running in with a frying pan at the ready and jumped up onto

a chair. There she stood with her eyes closed and her knees shaking like jelly. She always looked rather thin and spindly and up there on the chair she looked like she might blow away in a breeze. "Tell me where they are, Bob, and I'll hit them," she cried.

"There aren't any mice," Uncle Bob protested. "Don't you turn a catastrophe into a crisis now."

Then the clock chimed the half hour and Uncle Bob started to bounce up and down like an ornament on the end of a piece of string.

"I'm half an hour late now," he cried. "I'm supposed to be up at the big old house to advise them about their swimming pool. I'd better get up there now or they'll give me the sack and Mr. Grimble will get the job instead of me."

"I thought you two were friends now," said Aunt Maggie, cautiously opening half an eye and peering for signs of mice.

"We're friends when it comes to vegetables," Uncle Bob explained. "We're going to compete together at Strange Show. But we're still rivals as far as work is concerned. Last I heard, he'd invented an angulator of his own. I suspect he's resorted to espionage and pinched the idea from me. There's a strange-sensitive core, you see and—"

He was interrupted by a loud howl from the study.

"Have you found it?" called Uncle Bob expectantly.

"No," came the voice of the Searcher. "No sign of it yet. That was the lost-ometer again. It's up to eleven now."

Uncle Bob looked crestfallen.

"I'd better be going," he said as the howl came again. "They'll be wondering where I am at the big old house."

"Sounds like there's wolves now as well," said Aunt Maggie. "You're always running off when there's things to be dealt with, Bob."

"That's not wolves," Uncle Bob protested, "it's just the lost-ometer. Now then Peter," he said, turning to his nephew, "I'm going up to the big old house to talk through the work that needs to be done. I'll

spin it out for as long as I can. From what I hear, they've hit a band of strangeness digging a swimming pool. I'll talk about trigonometry. That should impress them. You bring the angulator up to the house as soon as the Searcher finds it. Is that all right?"

"But I don't know where the house is," Peter protested.

"Just ask anyone for the big old house," Uncle Bob told him. "You'll find it soon enough."

Aunt Maggie snorted. "You'll have the poor lad out there wandering the streets, and with wolves around and all."

"There aren't any wolves," said Uncle Bob as he disappeared out of the door.

There was another howl from the lost-ometer. Peter was eager to see what the Searcher was up to and climbed up the stairs behind him.

"Don't go up there," Aunt Maggie warned him. "It sounds like that's where the wolves are."

The Searcher was shovelling old food wrappers, empty drink cartons, and half-eaten bread buns up with a large spade, then slinging them into a suitcase.

"Wouldn't you like some black bags instead?" asked Peter. They always used black bags for rubbish on Evil Island, though they had to make them small enough so the crocodiles couldn't hide inside them.

"If I'd known it was going to be like this, I'd have brought the bag with the black hole inside," the Searcher told him. "We have to charge extra for that, but it does the job."

"So you're just using a suitcase instead?" asked Peter.

"An expanding suitcase," the searcher replied. "The instructions say it will keep on expanding forever, but I'm not sure that's going to be big enough."

"Peter!" Aunt Maggie called. "Have you gone too? Have you left me here with the wolves?"

Peter joined her down in the hall.

"There aren't any wolves," he explained. "And there aren't any mice either. There's just lots of lost stuff."

"Oh," said Aunt Maggie, "I suppose that's all right then."

But then the lost-ometer sounded again. It sounded like one of those whooping wagons that chase after criminals.

"What? Is it burglars now?" asked Aunt Maggie.

"It's a thirteen," said the Searcher in a panic-stricken voice. "I've never had one of those before."

"What does it mean?" asked Peter.

"I think it means the expanding suitcase has got too big to fit in the room. But it *is* in the room." He stopped and scratched his head. "We seem to have a space-time anomaly here."

"Isn't that a kind of flower?" asked Aunt Maggie.

"I said an anomaly, not an anemone. It's something that doesn't add up. I think it might be best if we call for the fire brigade."

"Are you sure?" asked Peter. "Wouldn't we be better with someone who does arithmetic? They should be the people to ask about something that doesn't add up."

"It's a bit late for that," said the Searcher. "What we need now is subtraction. I need someone to get me out of here. I've never found more lost stuff than the size of a room before. I'm feeling a bit dizzy."

Peter decided they should call for an ambulance as well but then he realised he didn't know how to call for anything. They didn't even seem to have telephones here on Peculiar Hill.

"Just release the canary," Aunt Maggie advised.

"What good will that do?" asked Peter.

"It's a homing canary," Aunt Maggie explained. "When it flies back to the pet shop, they'll know there's something wrong and they'll send the police."

"But we want an ambulance," said Peter.

"Or the fire brigade," called the Searcher.

"Don't stand there arguing," Aunt Maggie insisted, "just release the canary!"

"Help!" called the Searcher. He was starting to sound muffled, so Peter did as he had been told and opened the canary's cage. The bird looked surprised for a moment or two, then gave a merry whistle, spread its wings and flew away out of the window.

Peter went to check on the Searcher and found him pinned against the wall by the rapidly expanding suitcase.

"You don't look like the fire brigade," he said.

"They're on their way," said Peter.

"They better be," said the Searcher. "A few more mislaid buns and I'll be finished!"

4
Uncovered

By the time the emergency services came, there was an enormous bulge in the study wall that was shaped like the searcher, but the fire brigade managed to deflate the suitcase and set him free. The ambulance team examined him and found he had secondary squashing. It was nothing a little overnight stretching wouldn't cure, they pronounced cheerily. The police had also arrived and were looking suspiciously at all the abandoned buns. Finally, Mr. Fetlock from the pet shop arrived to return the canary.

"I thought I'd better send all three emergency services," he said. "You can't be too careful, can you? I thought Bob might be doing his DIY again."

Aunt Maggie assured him that it had not been that serious.

"It wasn't really any bother," she said, "except for the wolves."

"Wolves?" said the chief policeman, turning his attention away from the buns. "I'm not sure those are allowed without a licence."

"I need my coat," the Searcher called as the ambulance men carried him out on a stretcher. "I haven't got my coat."

"Where did you leave it?" Aunt Maggie asked.

"It's over the coat stand," he said.

"We haven't got a coat stand," said Aunt Maggie.

"There it is," said Peter, pulling it down from something that looked like a coat stand in the hall.

"That's not a coat stand," said Aunt Maggie. "That's a—"

"That's an angulator," said the chief policeman, reading the name on the side of the instrument. "That's a coincidence. We've had one of those reported missing."

"Of course you have," said Aunt Maggie. "That's the one that was missing. And all the time it's been covered up by the Searcher's coat."

"So that's that," the policeman said. "I'm glad we found your angulator. Yet another case successfully detected. All in a day's work, thank you madam. Come along sergeant, we'd better get back to the station."

But the sergeant was still not happy.

"I'd like to see the receipts for all those buns," he said.

"There's no receipts. I made them myself," said Aunt Maggie, "though I won't be making him any more when all he does is lose them. And you can tell him that when you see him, Peter, tell him that from me."

"All right, Aunt Maggie," said Peter, picking up the angulator. Now it was no longer covered by the Searcher's coat, it didn't look so much like a coat stand. It was about the same sort of height and had three legs like a coat stand but it was covered in dials and levers. Peter was looking forward to finding out more about it.

"I'd better take it to Uncle Bob," he said, squeezing past the policemen who were arguing about the buns.

"Yes, you better," said Aunt Maggie, "and tell him that losing all those buns has caused us a great deal of trouble."

"I will, Aunt Maggie, and by the way, it's safe to come down from the chair now."

"Oh yes," said Aunt Maggie, "I was forgetting."

5
Guatemala

Despite what Uncle Bob had said, it took Peter a while to find the big old house. The people he asked as he climbed the hill just told him to go all the way to the top, but when he got there, all he could see were the Strange Hotel to the left and a big driveway with a sign reading, **Strictly Private – Keep Out!** straight ahead.

So where was the big old house?

Amanda lived at the Strange Hotel and she would certainly know where this big old house was. But Peter didn't want to give her another chance to show off how much she knew and make him feel stupid. All he could think of to do was to set off along the nameless driveway, creeping cautiously past the **Strictly Private** sign in case it attacked him. If you ignored such signs at his previous home on Evil Island, the chances were you'd end up in a crocodile.

His nerves on edge at the thought of crocodiles, the sudden shout which came from behind made Peter jump.

"Are you looking for the big old house?"

Peter turned to see a girl of about his own age coming up the hill behind him. She had long curly hair and freckles. He didn't think he had seen her before.

"I can take you there," she said.

"Do you know the way?" asked Peter.

"I'd hardly offer to take you there if I didn't," the girl said reasonably. "What do you think I am, a practical joker or something?"

Peter grunted. "Well, I do know someone like that." He was thinking of Amanda, of course, though admittedly she seemed better behaved since that awful business with Algernon.

"Well don't worry, I know the way, all right," said the freckled girl. "I moved in a few days ago. I live there."

"Wow," said Peter, very impressed. "You own the big old house?"

"No, of course not," the girl replied. "I'm too young to own a house. My father owns it. He and I live there and so does my awful Uncle Percival. Oh, and what seem to be two hundred Australians, but that's another story. My mother and my brother will be living there too, but they're away on an adventure at the moment."

Peter was even more impressed. "What kind of adventure?"

"Oh, just an ordinary run of the mill adventure," the girl explained. "They run in the family, as you'll discover. Anyway, let me show you the house." She smiled broadly and led the way up the driveway.

"Are you sure it's safe?" asked Peter. "That sign—"

"What? The one saying **Private – Keep out**?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry about that. I live here so the sign doesn't apply to me, and I hereby appoint you as my friend, so it doesn't apply to you either. Does that set your mind at rest?"

"I suppose so," said Peter.

"My Uncle Percival put it up. He's suddenly got a secrecy thing, but we don't want to encourage him. Now then, I hope you don't mind me asking but why are you carrying a coat stand?"

Peter looked at the angulator he was carrying as though noticing it for the very first time.

"It isn't really a coat stand," he said, "it's an angulator. I'm bringing it for my Uncle Bob to help with your swimming pool."

The girl gave a gasp. "Oh, you must be Peter. I'm sorry, I should have known it was you. I heard them say you were coming on later. My name is Mala. Short for Guatemala."

"That's an interesting name," said Peter.

"Yes, isn't it?" Mala replied, "My father's an explorer so he named us after his favourite countries. My brother is Pat, short for Patagonia, which isn't really a country, but we won't go into that now. I'm pleased to meet you, Peter. I'm sorry I didn't recognise who you were. You must come with me to the house for tea and cake."

Peter was usually in favour of any arrangement involving cake, but he wasn't sure that Uncle Bob would approve.

"I'm supposed to be helping my uncle," he said. "I'd like to come for a cup of tea but I'll get into trouble."

"No, you won't," the girl insisted. "I'll say it was my fault. After all, it usually is. And anyway, your uncle is having an important discussion with my Uncle Percival. They'll be at it for ages."

"But—"

"Oh look," the girl exclaimed, "you can see the house from here."

The driveway they were following swung sharply to the right, so the big old house now emerged from beyond a copse of trees ahead. It looked enormous. It was made of crumbling old stone and was draped all over with climbing plants on trellises.

Peter gave a whistle. This was even bigger than the Strange Hotel next door.

"It's quite hidden away, isn't it?" said Mala. "It'll be even harder to find when they landscape the garden." She pointed out a long stretch of lawn to the right. "They're going to build lots of hills to hide it away."

Peter was puzzled. "But why? Isn't it hard enough to find already?

"You'd have thought so, wouldn't you? But like I say, my Uncle Percival seems to have developed an obsession with privacy. He says it's to keep my father's fans away. My father's famous, you see. Or used to be."

"Famous for what?"

"Famous for being an explorer. He used to write books about his travels. You've probably seen them. They're called *Mr. Flipper's Travels*."

"Hmm," said Peter, "so if your father is Mr. Flipper and you're Guatemala—"

"I'm Guatemala Flipper," said Mala. "It rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? Which reminds me, what do you call an undercover apple?"

Peter said he didn't know.

"A banana," said Mala. "There you are. I'm good at telling jokes, aren't I? I write them myself. Oh look, you can see the excavation now."

As they drew closer to the house, they could see a line of boards extending from the left-hand corner of the building. A truck was emerging from a gap in the line. It was laden down with soil.

"Is that where they're digging the hole for the swimming pool?" asked Peter.

"That's right," said Mala. "Uncle Percival wanted it built, which is strange because I've never known him to swim before."

"That truck looks tiny," said Peter, rubbing his eyes. Even allowing for the effect of the distance, the truck looked remarkably small.

"Yes," said Mala. "It's an Australian truck. The Australians are very small, you see, so they build their wagons the same way."

"Hmm," said Peter. "I didn't realise Australians were so tiny."

"Neither did I," said Mala, "but these ones are."

Peter was not convinced. He had always got the impression that Australians were big and brawny. He wondered if there was more than one place called Australia.

Mala began to explain about the house's construction and how many bedrooms it had, while Peter found himself wondering if it had screeching watch-geese on the lookout for bogeys, the same as they did at the Strange Hotel. There was plenty of noise, which increased

the closer they came to the house, but it didn't come from watch-geese. It came from the work that was going on in the excavation. Peter wondered if Uncle Bob was in there, waiting anxiously for the angulator. He realised he ought to deliver that first, before any tea and cake.

Then suddenly Mala broke off from what she was saying and grabbed hold of Peter's arm.

"Oh dear," she said. "It looks like Uncle Percival is waiting for us."

A man stood by the door to the house, watching them approach. He was smartly dressed in a suit and tie and had greasy, slicked back hair. His eyes were dark grey, drained of colour.

"Be careful," Mala whispered to Peter. "I don't trust my uncle any more than I can throw him. And believe me, I'm total rubbish at throwing."

As they reached the door, Uncle Percival smiled at Peter. It was an icy, toothy smile. It might have belonged to one of the weirder varieties of deep-sea fish.

"Ah, you must be Mr. Arkenthrob's nephew," the uncle declared. "I am pleased to meet you, Peter. My name is Percival Crow."

"Er, pleased to meet you, Mr. Crow," stuttered Peter. There was something about this man's gaze that made speech difficult. Peter thought he might make an excellent Searcher, as he seemed to be looking deep under Peter's skin.

"I see you have already met my niece Guatemala," said Mr. Crow. "And I am delighted to also observe that you have located your uncle's angulator. I am very pleased about that. He and I have been anxious about it, very anxious indeed. I wonder if I may look at the instrument please?" And to Peter's surprise and dismay, he reached out and wrenched the angulator out of the boy's hand before he had a chance to reply. His eyes were so full of hunger that for a moment Peter was scared he was going to eat it.

"Ah yes," said Mr. Crow, setting the instrument down on its feet and examining it carefully. "This really is very interesting. Here is the on-board abacus. That will be very useful for calculating the angles." He paused to nudge some coloured balls along a wire, grinning in satisfaction as he watched them slide. "This socket here must be where you insert the optional marker flares. And this if I'm not mistaken is the alert and retaliation circuit." He pressed a button and a light started glowing faintly pink. An alarm sounded and a short, barbed arrow emerged from the central body of the device. A sign lit up, reading: **Launch Rocket? Yes/No/Snooze**.

Mr. Crow gave a nod of appreciation. "All this and lightweight too," he said. "Your uncle is very clever."

Peter was also impressed, but this made him all the more anxious to get the instrument back. He didn't trust this Crow any more than Mala did.

"Yes, my uncle is very proud of it," said Peter. "And he'll be anxious for me to bring it to him, I think," he added pointedly.

"Oh, there is no need for you to trouble yourself any further," replied Crow. "I shall take it to him myself. Your uncle and I will not be much longer. In the meantime, why don't you take some tea? You can keep Guatemala company. It will save her getting under the heels of everyone else."

He gave a rather unpleasant smile at them both and then slinked away, taking the precious instrument with him, his shoes squeaking as he went. Peter was rendered speechless. He tried to call out in protest but could only produce a wheeze. Mala made a face. It was the kind of face you might make if you ate something nasty.

"There you are," she whispered, "I told you you wouldn't like him."

"Who does he think he is," he managed to splutter to Mala, "snatching the thing off me like that and then walking away with it? The angulator belongs to my uncle."

Mala smiled rather sadly.

"I'm afraid Uncle Percival is my father's business manager," she said. "He organises everything round here – including me if he gets the chance. He thinks I'm lazy but it's not my fault if I've nothing to do, is it?"

Peter shook his head. "That must be very annoying."

"It is," Mala continued. "Fortunately, my father always sticks up for me if I tell him I'm having a problem, but I don't like to bother him very often. He's got enough on his plate with his expedition. Don't worry about that instrument though. If there's any problem about it, I'll have a word with my father later. Let's go for some tea, shall we? After all, you have my uncle's official permission to take it now. The parlour's this way." She turned and led the way along a grand oak panelled hall.

"By the way," she said, "in case you were wondering about that joke I told you, an undercover policeman is a policeman disguised as a criminal, so an undercover apple would be an apple disguised as a banana. But jokes are never as funny when you have to explain them, don't you find?"

Peter glanced back to where Uncle Percival had disappeared with the angulator and wondered if it was not too late to go and grab it back. But that seemed likely to get him into more trouble than ever, so he followed Mala and tried to turn his attention to cake instead.

"What was that about a banana?" he asked.