Elsetime

Eve McDonnell



Published in the UK by
Everything with Words Limited
3rd Floor, Descartes House,
8 Gate Street, London WC2A 3HP

www.everythingwithwords.com

Text copyright © Eve McDonnell 2020
Cover and illustrations © Holly Ovenden 2020

Eve McDonnell has asserted her right under the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978–1–911427–17–9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

For Bobby & Faye

– Three little squeezes –



Prologue

Glory, 1927 – When the Dust Settles

"I think I know what it means now," Glory told her green ragdoll, stitched by her own hand and now stuffed feet-first up her long sleeve. Balancing on her tiptoes on her mother's hand-painted stool, Glory peered into the top shelf of her parents' wardrobe. She slid out the keepsakes box and balanced it carefully along her wooden hand.

"*When the dust settles*," she said with a voice way older than her eleven years. "That's what they kept telling me, so they did. From the second Mama was gone, they said things would be better when the dust settles."

Glory jumped down from the stool with such a thump from her leather boots it caused her big sister to yell something from the kitchen below. She kicked her own heel for being so noisy and rolled her eyes to the heavens. "It's nothing, Dee-Dee! I'm perfectly fine. Tripped, so I did."

Laying the box on the bed, Glory twisted her arm around so that the ragdoll's face looked down upon its dusty lid. "Well, Doll, do you think the dust *has* finally settled?" She took a deep breath in through her nose and sneezed. "I can do it…" she said as she pulled the ragdoll from her sleeve. "I can find a proper job, so I can – like a proper grown-up so I can put some pennies in Dee-Dee's rent tin. It's not fair she should be baking half the night to keep us in this house, you know." If the ragdoll had eyes, they'd have noticed a rare glint of fear in Glory's, for losing their mother and father to fever within weeks of each other was hard enough without the fear of losing their home too. "Bad luck comes in threes and that's a fact, so I got to do my bit," Glory gulped.

She lifted the lid. The box wasn't very full but everything in it was brimming with memories of her mother. She slowly swirled her wooden hand around

its contents and snagged a pair of silk stockings with the tiny hook that protruded from the tip of her wooden forefinger. She fished them out and held them up before her.

"They'll do, for a start," she said. "They'll have me looking as old as Dee-Dee – sixteen at least." Although finding paid work wasn't unheard of for an eleven-year-old, she was smart enough to know that proper jobs were only open to teenagers who'd finished school, and mostly boys at that. Of course, she'd never let *not* being a boy stand in her way and, with the help of her mother's things, she'd surely give any teenager a run for their money. But there was little she could do about finishing school; despite doing well in all her subjects, the stuffy headmistress reckoned the school's efforts would be wasted on a girl with no future, as they saw it.

"They expelled me, you know. Because of this!" Glory held up her wooden hand and shook it hard. "Stupid hand. Stupid headmistress," she muttered and took a sidelong glance at her ragdoll. "*What*?" She could have sworn it questioned her with its button eyes. She bit the inside of her mouth until it hurt – had she kept it shut rather than shout back

all those words at the headmistress maybe she'd be learning algebra right this minute. But it wasn't her fault that she found it hard to keep her feelings, not to mention her words, to herself. Regardless, she had the right to a proper career, didn't she? A career in a fancy emporium doing what she loved best: designing jewellery.

She considered her mother's red lipstick, twisting it up before her, and noticed how it was perfectly formed to fit only her mother's kiss. She carefully placed it back into the box and, instead, stuffed a ruby red cloche hat under her arm. She swung the stockings over her shoulder, wrapped a string of beads around her neck and, from beneath the bed, pinched the heels of two laced-up grey and ivory boots.

Several minutes later, wearing her mother's best, she confidently strode to the mirror. Picturing a grand shop door before her, she knocked on the mirror's glass and pouted her lips just like the French ladies she'd seen outside the Fitzroy Hotel.

In her best grown-up voice, she addressed her reflection, "Good afternoon. Your jewellery emporium is looking rather splendid today. May I interest you in my designs?"

She just might get away with it; putting on a grown-up voice came naturally now that she spent most of her days without as much as a word to anyone her age. She patted down her dull, blue dress and made plans to accidentally borrow one of her sister's.

"I can do it," she said, again. She might actually land herself a job to keep the landlord at bay. Leaning forward, she squinted at her own eyes through the dusty mirror. "And who knows, Gloria Bobbin, if you keep your trap shut, one day you might even own an emporium of your very own." She knew too well that missing a hand meant being considered by some as hopeless, but one thing was for sure: she was a million miles from dreamless.

She bunched up the hat in her fist, ready to wipe the layer of dust from the mirror, but stalled. "Maybe I'll let the dust settle a little bit longer," she whispered, winked at herself and, for luck, crossed her fingers as tight as they would go.



Inthington Town of Old

– 2nd January 1864 –

A long, long time ago in a place called Inthington, where streets were made of cobble and the sky of black smoke, hardworking folk in horse-drawn carriages made their way to the fabric and button factories by a five-arched bridge. And there begins the story of a young mudlark: a boy who digs up long-lost, forgotten things from the muddy foreshore of the River Notion. *Treasures*, he named them – and his name was Needle.



Chapter One

Needle's longest nail was on his little finger – carefully nibbled into a point and perfect for rescuing. He reached down to the mud, faced his palm skyward and hooked the hidden treasure in one swift move.

SCH-M-OCK!

It was a slow sound and, if Needle tried to make it, he had to pop his lips open once he had done the *m* bit. It made a kind of sucking noise and Needle reckoned if it had a colour, it would be purple. That's what he always heard when he wiggled things free from the soggy mud.

"Fine work, Magpie. It be a ring, of sorts." Needle spat on it and rubbed it gently against the leather strap of his satchel. "*Gold*. It twists around twice on

top, see?" He held it up close to Magpie's beak as she tiptoed around him. "And I be having you know it has four claws that once held a fancy gem." He placed it in the palm of his hand.

A painful shock of cold hit where the muddy treasure lay. He closed his eyes and waited to hear its story; somewhere inside, perhaps in the beat of his heart, he could feel it stirring. He stuck out his chest, stretched his neck high and put his free hand against the crook of his back.

"Easy, this one, Magpie. I see three girls paddling by the river's edge on a hot day acting like they be doing something they should not." He sneaked a peek at his audience of one and his lips stretched wide into a proud smile. "They be throwing pebbles trying to down bread that was thrown for the gulls and the girl dressed in blue threw a good one but the darned ring flew off with it. She didn't even know it was gone. It had a ruby stone in it one time and I be thinking she stole it from her aunt – a nasty old thing by the sounds of it. I be telling you more if the ruby were still in it." He opened his eyes, threw the ring in the air and caught it again. "Happened forty-odd years ago, at least."

To thank his bird for finding it, Needle stretched a worm from a tuft of frosty grass, taking care not to break it, and offered it whole. "Da didn't name you Magpie for nothing, you know. You might be a crow but you be putting real magpies to shame. They find shiny things but you're able to see shiny treasures even when they be covered in mud. The best treasure hunter in Inthington." He studied his crow. Were her cheeks blooming red beneath her feathers? Probably. If only he could find a way to hide his tell-tale cheeks too.

He scraped mud from the ring's band and held it high, allowing the sharp winter sun to bounce off its gold. "Mam'll be happy. Soon as I put glass in it, this ring be worth a pot of proper beef stew. And with Da being away, there might be some in it for you too, Magpie."

The treasure fit his forefinger best and, as the black hum of waking factories filled the air, his satchel was soon filled with more: half a dozen pieces of fine china, some copper wire, two bent coins, a belt buckle and a rose-shaped button – each with their own river-swept story.

They turned around when they reached the old

bakery that overlooked the River Notion to the right and where the walls of the town jail towered over to the left. Beyond that point was kept for warmer days; the tall walls cast shadows across the foreshore, so, on a frosty day, the hidden treasures were just too hard to dig. At least, that's what Needle might say if anyone should ask. To tell the truth, with Da no longer by his side, those bakery thugs were likely to hammer him with thrown bread – the burnt chunks that hurt.

Don't fight back for you might hurt the one bit of good in them, Needle's mother would warn.

But, if you're sure there's none in them, give as good as you get, his father would add.

As Needle listed the morning's bounty of river-swept treasure out loud, he thumb-twisted the gold ring around his finger, one full turn for each find. Along with the ring, there would be plenty in his satchel to bend, etch and sculpt into something his mother might sell on her market stall, but his eyes never left the ground.

Needle dropped to his haunches. Like a curious seal's head, a circle of glass with a blackened cork poked out of the mud. "Have you a story to tell?"