
The
SMIDGENS
CRASH-LAND

Books by David O'Connell

The Chocolate Factory Ghost
The Dentist of Darkness
The Revenge of the Invisible Giant

The Smidgens
The Smidgens Crash-Land



DAVID O'CONNELL

The SMIDGENS

CRASH-LAND

Illustrated by
SEB BURNETT



BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © David O'Connell, 2022
Illustrations copyright © Seb Burnett, 2022

David O'Connell and Seb Burnett have asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author and Illustrator of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-4056-7; eBook: 978-1-5266-4054-3

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters

For my editor, Lucy Mackay-Sim –
thank you for everything!





1

Take-Off

Gafferty Sprout's parents had grounded her for a whole month after *The Incident*, as they called it. This was their way of describing what was, in fact, several incidents, where *incidents* was a polite word for *extremely-dangerous-and-insane-and-not-to-mention-totally-forbidden activities*. Activities which had put her family in danger and had nearly led to both Gafferty and her new best friend, Will, meeting their ends in a very horrible way. But that was ages ago – a whole month! – and now Gafferty was free. Free to have fun and free to have … more *incidents*.

'Does your dad know you're doing this?' said Will, as he stood by her side on the roof of the chocolate factory. He studied her face suspiciously. Gafferty's father was

not someone to be crossed. Will sensed trouble behind his friend's mischievous grin.

'Don't worry,' she said, dodging the question. 'Look, I've been grounded for so long I just want to do something that is the complete opposite of being grounded. And you're going to help me: I want to fly.'

The breeze swept across her face as she looked out over the town below the factory. The human world was a place most Smidgens feared. But even though Gafferty was only seven centimetres tall (and that was when standing on tiptoe), for her it was the realm of adventure. She'd hunted chips in its takeaways, dug for treasures (useful, edible and … otherwise) buried in its rubbish bins, and dodged the *kars* and *bysickals* that the silly Big Folk rode around its streets. It had given her new friends and presented her with strange and sometimes frightening experiences. Yes, it had been dangerous, but it had been totally worth it.

'I suppose the general idea of flying is to avoid the ground as much as possible,' Will conceded, as they strapped on their crash helmets. Gafferty had borrowed one of his spares. It had a bird's features painted on to it – all the Roost Clan dressed as flying creatures of one kind or another. 'But your dad says Smidgens were never

meant to fly. He won't like it.'

'We've done this before.' Gafferty grabbed the control bar of the training glider, copying the position of Will's hands. 'And you'll be right beside me the whole time. You're in charge – I can't go anywhere without you.'

Will nodded but still looked uncomfortable.

'We'll go on three,' he said reluctantly. 'One … two …'

'THREE!' shouted Gafferty, pushing them off the roof. Her stomach turned a somersault as the glider plunged unnervingly downwards, but at once she felt the smooth, strong force of the breeze passing over the top of its wings, the vibration travelling through the frame of the glider to her hands as the craft was lifted over the factory gates and into the sky.

'I'm in charge, you said!' yelled Will, fighting to get the glider under control, but Gafferty just laughed, filled with joy at the incredible sense of speed as the air rushed past her. They soared high over the houses of the Big Folk, leaving behind the grey-tiled roof of the factory which hid her home beneath its forgotten basement.

'Wheeeeeee!' she said. 'The world is so BIG, Will! There's so much to explore! So much to do!'

'You've only just found out that your family aren't the only Smidgens left in the world,' said Will, as he banked

the glider towards the centre of the town. 'You've united two of the old Smidgen clans who lost contact years ago, *and* seen off actual ghosts and evil Big Folk. Won't that do for now?'

'I suppose,' she grumbled, although when Will talked about *The Incident* like that it did sound rather impressive. 'But I've spent my whole life down in the Tangle. In those dark tunnels, running from place to place on our scavenging trips. You and the rest of the Roost Clan live in the daylight, Will. You get to see EVERYTHING from up here. It's so wonderful. I want to do more! I want to be free!'

She threw her arms out, letting go of the control bar so that she swung from the glider by her harness. The craft wobbled alarmingly.

'Let's just get to the Roost in one piece,' muttered Will. 'That will be a good start.'

'Wait! Look – the humans are having one of their markets!'

Gafferty pointed to the open square below. It was packed with food-laden stalls, their rectangular, stripy awnings forming a colourful patchwork, so the market resembled one of the quilts her mother sewed from scraps of stolen cloth. People were busy buying and selling vegetables, fruit and cheese, or chatting over the bread

and cakes and pastries. From so high above they didn't look big or dangerous at all. 'Let's get a better view, Will – please!'

Will rolled his eyes but tilted the glider so that it swooped across the marketplace. A couple of Big Folk glanced upwards but saw nothing but an odd-shaped pigeon darting overhead.

'That wheel of cheddar could feed us for ten years!' said Gafferty as they circled over a cheese stall. 'And those cakes – the smell of that bread! Will, we have to stop and grab some crumbs to take with us!'

'Gafferty – it's too risky! Don't be so silly.'

She ignored him. She knew it was silly. But all the colour and scent and noise – it was intoxicating! They were just the kind of experiences she wanted. She spotted a young human boy, standing next to a bakery stall, his hands reaching for a sandwich his mother had just bought him. He bit greedily into the deep filling of cheese and pickle. It looked very tasty.

FLUMPH! Gafferty was just aware of a flurry of feathers nearby when the glider was knocked forcefully sideways, wrenching their hands from the control bar. They spun violently, tumbling across the busy market and narrowly missing the clock tower that stood at its centre.



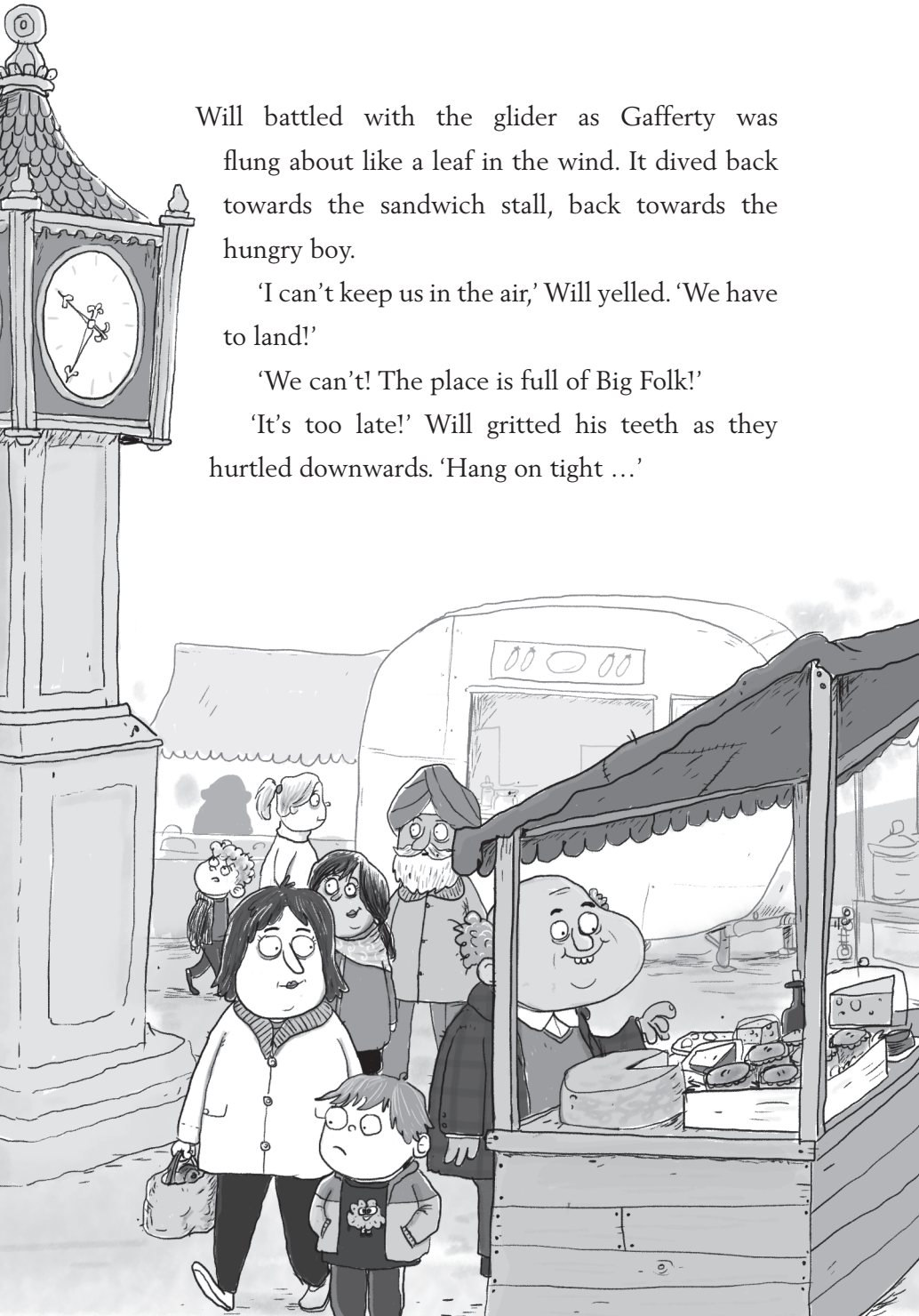
'A pigeon!' was all Will managed to say, as he fought to right the craft. Gafferty thought she glimpsed a bird's shape dart away across the square as they rolled with dizzying speed, the world cartwheeling around them. Whether it had bumped into them by accident or had seen them as a rival, the pigeon hadn't waited around to see the damage it had caused.

Will battled with the glider as Gafferty was flung about like a leaf in the wind. It dived back towards the sandwich stall, back towards the hungry boy.

'I can't keep us in the air,' Will yelled. 'We have to land!'

'We can't! The place is full of Big Folk!'

'It's too late!' Will gritted his teeth as they hurtled downwards. 'Hang on tight …'





2

Secret Agent Noah

The glider whipped over the heads of several unsuspecting humans, then plunged into the kiosk, landing heavily in the middle of a huge plastic tub of lettuce leaves. The impact sent the wet lettuce flying up around the Smidgens before it slumped back down over them like so many soggy bath towels.

For a moment, Gafferty didn't move, stunned by the collision. Then a huge drop of ice-cold water smacked down on to her head. It broke over her crash helmet, streaming freezing water over her shoulders. She let out a furious shriek. Will quickly hushed her.

'You're alive then,' he whispered, testing his arms and legs as he dangled from his harness next to her. 'That

landing could have been a lot worse.'

Before Gafferty could think of an appropriately sarcastic response, he unbuckled himself from the glider and dropped into the salad leaves.

'We'll have to abandon the wings,' he said, scrambling over the sodden lettuce to the edge of the tub, 'and make for the nearest Tangle entrance. Do you know which one is closest?'

'No! I've not been through the market before.'

'What about your atlas? Can't that help?'

Of course! In her panic Gafferty had forgotten. Her atlas of the Tangle was one of her most prized possessions. Thankfully her scavenger bag had stayed dry. She dragged the book out and quickly flicked through its pages.

'There's one in the clock tower. It's not too far. But what about your glider? It's going to end up as the filling in someone's sandwich if we leave it.'

'It's too wet and heavy! And there's no time anyway! We'll be spotted any minute. Hurry up and let's move!'

They clambered up the slippery side of the tub and peered out from under the lettuce. Two huge brown eyes stared back at them.

'It was you! I thought I saw little people flying on that aeroplane thing,' boomed a voice. 'I didn't imagine it.'



It was the boy, his half-eaten cheese sandwich still in his hand. Gafferty guessed he was probably the same age as her little brother Gobkin. His freckled face was glowing with delight. 'Are you toys? I heard they were making action figures with artificial intelligence. Is that what you are?'

Gafferty glanced at Will, who clung to the tub's edge, frozen with fear. Big Folk children were dangerous: sharp-eyed, fast moving and unpredictable. There was no telling what they would do. But this boy didn't seem threatening.

Remember the Rules of the Smidgens, thought Gafferty, *the rules of survival*. Rule Four was: *if in doubt, make it up*. Gafferty had an uneasy relationship with Rule Four.

'You're absolutely right,' she said brightly, deciding to give it a go anyway. 'Arty-farty intelligence. That's us.'

'Arti*ficial* intelligence,' the boy replied doubtfully.

'Exactly. That's what I said.'

'You're very lifelike,' he observed warily. 'I expect that's an animatronic thingy. I've seen robot dinosaurs at a theme park. They were brilliant. Mum was scared but I wasn't. What's your name?'

'I'm …' Gafferty paused as she tried to think of a convincing name. 'I'm called Gafftimus Prime, and this is my friend Willbot Saladcrasher.'

Will narrowed his eyes at her but said nothing.

'I'm Noah,' said the boy. 'What kind of things can you do? Do you come with any guns?'

'I don't think so.'

'Oh.' Noah gave a disappointed sigh.

'Actually, we were just out on an exciting secret expedition from the toy shop, testing our glider, but we had a bit of a mishap with a pigeon. Terrible drivers, pigeons.' Gafferty slowly climbed out of the lettuce tub. She looked around. Noah's mother was busy chatting to

the stallholder. No one but Noah had seen them. 'We'd better be on our way back or the shopkeeper will miss us,' she said. 'And it's best if you don't tell anyone about us. We might get into trouble. Or worse: sent back to the toy factory.'

'I can help,' Noah whispered. He grabbed a paper bag from a pile on the stall. 'Get in here and I can carry you a little way. I can't go far though.'

Will looked horrified at the idea. Gafferty hesitated for a moment. It was risky – very risky – but they were unlikely to get through the busy market without being seen otherwise.

'Just get us to the clock tower,' she said. 'Our computer brains will guide us the rest of the way.'

The boy nodded. Gafferty dragged the terrified Will into the bag.

'I'll put the rest of my sandwich in there with you, so it doesn't look suspicious,' said Noah. 'I can say I'm saving it for later.'

'You're good at this secret mission stuff,' said Gafferty.

'I'm going to be a secret agent when I grow up. Secret agents are always having to do this kind of thing.'

He gently picked up the bag and ran towards the tower before his mother could notice he was gone.

Cramped and uncomfortable, Gafferty and Will held on tightly to the sandwich as they were bounced around inside their paper hiding place, past all the unsuspecting shoppers.

'What is that smell?' said Will, covering his mouth. 'I think I'm going to be sick!'

'Don't you like pickle?' said Gafferty, nibbling on a breadcrumb. 'It is a bit on the spicy side.'

Fortunately, it wasn't long before the bag came to a halt and opened. They scurried out into the fresh air. Noah had been true to his word. Will's face flooded with relief when he saw that they were at the foot of the clock tower that loomed over the whole square. There was a crack in its ancient stone base, unnoticed by any Big Folk, but to any Smidgen it was obviously a door. Without stopping, Will dived straight through it to safety.

Gafferty, however, lingered. Noah had done them a kind favour, even though he believed they were hi-tech action figures. Would she have behaved the same if the tables were turned?

'Thank you!' she called up to him. 'I hope you get all the toys you want. With smarty-fish-hole intelligence and guns and everything.'

He grinned and waved.

‘After all …’ Gafferty chuckled to herself as she dragged her scavenger bag through the Smidgen door. ‘It’s only fair after the amount of cheese I’ve just pinched from your sandwich.’