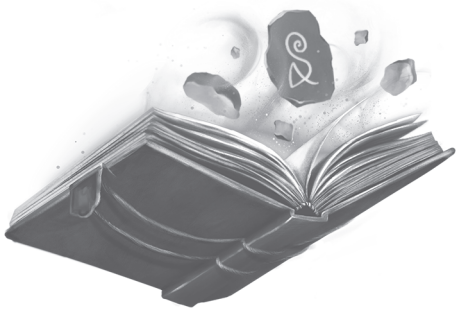


Chapter One

The Cairn

June 1954

'Gerroff me!'

Hurtling forward, away from Miss Gloria and her dreaded metal comb, I pushed past Judy, playing with her dolls, and dashed out of the common room.

I bounded up the rickety wooden stairs two at a time, up three flights, almost to the attic, which used to be the old servants' quarters. Hands on my knees, I crouched and took great gulping breaths while my heartbeat slowed. Even though I was out of sight, Miss Gloria still hollered my name from downstairs.

'HEATHER!'

I knew she wasn't really cross, but there was no way I was gonna let her get anywhere near me with that comb neither. Not if she knew what was good for her.

'Where's that Heather's got to?'

Miss Gloria was seventeen, and one of the staff who watched over us children here at Fablehouse. She loved combing our hair and fussing over our pinafores, like we were her own real-life dolls.

When I'd arrived a week before, she'd rattled on about being clean, tidy and 'respectable' – said it was expected of 'young ladies'. But my hair don't need brushing every day – what a waste of time that'd be! Fixing my fuzzball with a fat rubber band would do me just fine. Then at my weekly bathtime I could just sink under the water and let the soapy suds clean my curls. There wasn't any need to mess about with plaits and bunches and whatnot. And since when did looking 'nice' mean diddly-squat? It wasn't as if people would line up to adopt me anyway. I couldn't see how this place would be any different from the other homes I'd been in.

'Heather! Sweetie! Come on now.' Even far away as I was, her voice still echoed through corridors. I crept along the back hallways and nipped down the

old servants' staircase that no one seemed to use, probably because it was riddled with woodworm and spiderwebs.

I was aiming for the back door as the ghostly echoes of 'Be a good girl and come on down here! Why you always running away?' followed me.

Miss Gloria was so smiley – weren't natural to be that cheerful. That entire week, I never saw her get annoyed or raise her hand, not even to the younger ones, and they whined something chronic. But no one's made of rainbows right through, are they? I reckoned that's why she liked doing our hair so much; that was how she got her anger out – by yanking and pulling at our knots and curls. And with thirteen of us, all with frizzy curly hair, there was definitely enough tangles to go around.

She always beamed when she was done too, sounding so satisfied.

'See? There. Much better, don't you think?' she'd said the other day as she paraded me in front of a mirror, my scalp smarting like it was on fire. Seeing my reflection, I'd winced. Mirrors always reminded me of why I'd been brought to Fablehouse in the first

place. Avoiding mirrors meant it didn't matter what colour I was, or how my hair looked; I could just get on with being me and forget about being one of them 'Brown Babies' that no one here wanted.

'HEATHER!'

I crept down the second staircase. Arlene's singing soared through the corridors. I was relieved to share a room with her, though she never stopped singing. She was a year younger than me, but nowhere near as annoying as the other ten-year-olds here, Ruth and Martha.

I could still hear Arlene as I sidled down the last staircase and eased out the back door.

Of all the orphanages I'd been in, so far Fablehouse didn't seem that bad. I'd not seen anything that made me want to run away – yet. They treated us nice, and we had plenty to eat. Miss Isolde, the headmistress, had told me that it was her life's work to make sure we'd all grow up to be 'Productive Members of Society'.

'We may seem rather unusual here, Heather,' she'd said, when the sleek silver car dropped me off, 'but you'll soon see that everything comes from the very deepest desire to ensure you flourish!'

So, every morning we had reading, writing and arithmetic, like at a regular school. And judging by how some of them carried on, it was the first time they'd done any learning. There was a Miss Clara – she was in training to be a schoolteacher, so she taught us. In the afternoons, we had free time to play as long as we stayed on the grounds. I'd explored every chance I got but hadn't discovered the best escape route yet – should I need to run. The grounds would be marvellous for hide-and-seek, but you needed friends for that; and that's the last thing I wanted. I'd lived in three other orphanages and making friends was a mistake; sometimes they'd be gone without warning, or you were. Better to be a lone ranger, less chance of heartbreak.

The place was all right, but there was no denying it: us Fablehouse lot had been hushed up and hidden away. The nearest village was called Selworthy, but I hadn't been there yet. Apparently trips were limited to church on Sundays, and thankfully I'd arrived last Monday. I overheard the nurses saying that Selworthy liked to pretend we didn't exist. All because our mums got too friendly with Black soldiers and when they went back overseas . . . well, us Brown Babies were the

problem left behind. That was the reason none of us would ever forget that we weren't wanted.

After counting to ten, I crept along the red-brick wall that ran the length of the house and out to the gardens. I darted past the vegetable patch and chicken coops, shushing my fingers to my lips as the chickens squawked. No sign of Miss Gloria. And as long as I kept an eye out, I'd be able to avoid Miss Clara too.

The lawns around the house stretched as far as the eye could see, green grass and big trees in every direction. Ruth and Martha played hopscotch on the paving stones while Leon and Henry were playing Snap loudly. I headed for the run-down stone building, which the others called 'the stables'. I hadn't seen any horses. Maybe Fablehouse had them once, but clearly those days were long gone.

Reaching the corner of the stables, I rounded it and stared across the large front lawn framed by gigantic oaks. Just beyond them was a thick layer of bushes and undergrowth – I thought they might lead to the sea: my ultimate destination for today's adventure.

Halfway across the front lawn, a squeaky voice came from my left.

'Oww!'

I glanced around but couldn't see anyone.

'Up 'ere. H*elp!*'

Halfway up a tree, chubby, dirty knees flapped about, with one scruffy boot dangling off a foot. I stared upwards into tangled branches.

'What're you *doing*?' I muttered.

A mournful, mud-streaked little boy's face looked down. 'I was gettin' me ball but it's stuck an' . . .' His voice rose, tears cresting a wave. 'Now I can't get down!'

It was Davey, mischievous, mop-haired and the youngest in Fablehouse; he was only six, and everyone cooed over him. I always liked younger kids in the other homes I'd been in – they told it to you straight. Life would be a lot easier if grown-ups took a leaf out of their book.

I tutted – how on earth had he got himself stuck up there? 'Lean over that big branch, give me your hand, and I'll help you.'

He wriggled to lie almost flat on the branch I pointed at and tried to stretch his fingers to meet mine, but it was no use. No way could I reach him.

After huffing and puffing a while, he started bawling. 'Lloyd!'

'L*loyd*?'

What did Davey want *him* for? Lloyd was probably in the common room, helping the staff, telling them how much he knew about everything. He was such a goody-goody. The sort who'd tell on you if it'd save his own skin. But I'd noticed that sometimes he forgot to put on his helpful humble-orphan act: his mouth turned down, and those big hazel eyes glazed over, dark and sorrowful, full of unspoken hurts. He was only a year older than me, but sometimes he looked like a sad old man.

'Now you listen up – Lloyd ain't here,' I snapped. Then I softened my tone, cos bless Davey – the way he trembled, clinging to that cracked branch, it wasn't going to hold out much longer.

'I can help you. If you want.' I added as an afterthought, 'I'm Heather.'

'Heffver.' Davey wiped his snotty nose with the back of his hand, and then an almighty crack sounded out as he fell, down, down – into my waiting outstretched arms.

'It's OK. I gotcha.'

I buckled under his wriggling, wailing weight and we both tumbled backwards into the grass. From

up high I'd thought he'd be as light as a feather, but he was a right lump; nearly crushed me.

'Oh! Thank goodness.' Miss Clara barrelled across the lawn, pinafore flying and arms outstretched, her boot laces flapping. 'Davey! H*eather!* Davey!'

I didn't want to hang around for the crushing kisses and what-have-yous, so I jumped up and pegged it through bushes and tangled weeds towards the tree-lined lanes leading away from the house.

'See youse later!' I cried over my shoulder.

'Be back for supper!' was the last thing I heard as Miss Clara focused all her attention on Davey.

Wandering off hadn't been allowed at the places I'd lived before, and I still couldn't quite believe that no one ever chased after me here. But they didn't. I asked Arlene about it on my first night. She'd snorted and said, 'Well, even if we go gadding about, we stick out like a sore thumb, don't we? Anything amiss an' the bobbies will drag you back before you can say Bob's your uncle!'

The clattering noises from Fablehouse faded the deeper into the undergrowth I went, the sweet scent of the hanging baskets lingering.

Finally I could hear myself think. Finally . . . I was away from it all. I breathed as deeply as I could, feeling my stomach lift and the breeze tickle my nostrils as I exhaled. I tramped my own path through the scratchy undergrowth and long grass.

Yesterday afternoon we'd had a 'Nature Nurture' lesson with Miss Isolde. She'd showed us how you could boil stinging nettles to make tea and wrap dock leaves around a graze. She claimed trees, flowers and plants had their own unique magic; told us how trees cared for each other, gave each other space, and said we ought to do the same. It was a bit odd, to be honest. She'd drifted off mid-sentence a few times, with a faraway look in her eyes. But now, in this place, all the interesting things she'd said came rushing back to me. She had a funny way of looking at the world and I liked it.

Although it was June, the sun was hidden now, branches thick with leaves blotting out the sky. I shuddered, rubbing my arms. I stomped past bushes and grey squirrels scampered out of my way.

I knew that Fablehouse owned loads of land. I'd only been in Miss Isolde's office once, for my welcome meeting when I'd first arrived, but I'd seen

the huge, illustrated maps on the walls revealing twisty winding lanes, dense forested areas, and paths which led across moors, all the way to the sea. The other day, I'd taken a path which led to a lake, but today I wanted the sea air in my nostrils.

A wide-open plain opened up – the moorlands. Purple heather littered the heathland, which was twisted and threaded through with lime-green bracken and yellow gorse.

Now the sun was high in the sky and blazing. Walking was tough going, although my walking boots helped. A stony path sloped gently up from the moorlands and soon little hot sparks were darting up and down my calves. A sharp stabbing started in my side too, so I stopped and hoped the pain would go away. Next time I'd be better prepared and bring a drink.

But I wasn't about to turn back, so I crested the hill. In front of me was a bare-branched tree, and then a little way ahead of that, the biggest, strangest pile of rocks and stones that I'd ever seen. Miss Isolde had mentioned this little pile of stones yesterday: a cairn. The way she pronounced the word sounded like '*care*-n', a Scottish word from ancient times. She'd said no

one knew who had piled so many stones in one place, or why. But there must have been a reason. The stones were taller than me and formed a rough solid column. I couldn't work out how they stayed stuck together, but the cairn stood firm, like it was unbreakable. The views around were endless too. One side was open heathland, and the other was close to a cliff edge that overlooked the wild, foamy sea.

Walking closer to the gigantic pile, the oddest thing happened. The ever-present chattering in my mind, which told me I'd never be good enough, that no one would ever want me, that I was stupid – the endless marching band – fluttered to a standstill. The birds quietened. Everything hushed. 'Calm down,' people said to me when my temper flared, as it often did because there was so much to rage against. I wasn't comfortable with calm, wasn't used to feeling safe, and yet here, suddenly, a feeling of being protected shivered through my bones, almost a whisper: *We will hold you.*

As I walked closer to the cairn, my stomach swooshed, like when you cycle down a steep hill with your hands off the handlebars, feeling completely free

but wild too, especially if you're yelling at the same time.

I'd reached the stones. I let my fingertips linger, touching each one to connect. Staring up at this tall column, I wondered why and who and when? It felt as if I glowed from the inside, like lights flickering inside me.

Some edges were smooth and cool, and some jagged. I felt slightly sleepy, dazed. Like a fat cat in the sun: full and contented at the same time.

The wind whisked and rustled through the gorse, and I heard a sudden rumbling noise . . . from the stones? It sounded like the belly of the world groaning from underneath the earth, and my fingers snapped away, tingling warm. What had happened? Had I done something?

My stomach spiked, as if something was about to happen. The air itself was thrumming, electric, poised. Excitement edged with trepidation scurried up my outstretched arms as flashes of goosebumps followed, raised, waiting.

Then: twigs and branches cracking.