SCARE GROUND



ANGELA KECOJEVIC

SCAREGROUND

ANGELA KECOJEVIC



NEEM TREE
PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Published by Neem Tree Press Limited, 2023
Copyright © Angela Kecojevic, 2023

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Neem Tree Press Limited
95A Ridgmount Gardens, London, WC1E 7AZ
United Kingdom
info@neemtreepress.com
www.neemtreepress.com

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

ISBN 978-1-915584-21-2 Paperback
ISBN 978-1-915584-22-9 Ebook

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher at the address above.

Printed and bound in Great Britain.

For anyone afraid of the dark—be brave!

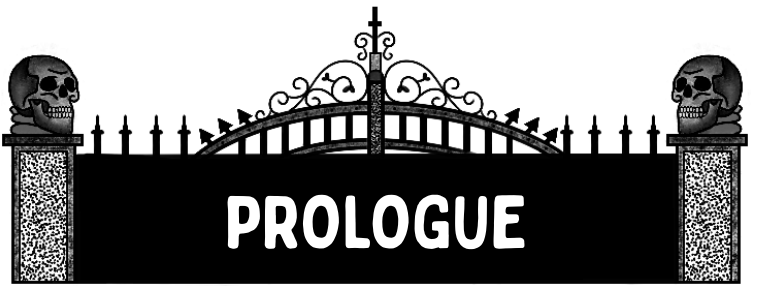
ARE YOU READY FOR THE UNEXPECTED?

THE EXTRAORDINARY?

THE DARING?


RIVER THAMES
QUEEN'S HOUSE
PARK ROAD
NANCY'S HOUSE (BAKERY)
ROYAL PATH
CURIOSITY SHOP
GREENWICH PARK
FLORENCE WITHERBY'S HOUSE
ORCHARD STREET
GREENWICH MARKET
OXLEAS WOOD
VICARAGE LANE
ROYAL OBSERVATORY
FOREST GRAVEYARD
VICARAGE
ARTHUR'S HOUSE
PEARBERRY LANE
APPLE STREET
SCAREGROUND
GHOST CARRIAGE
CAROUSEL
WAGONS
DEADLY WALTZERS
CAPTAIN NIMBUS'S SHIP
HELL-TER SKELTER
GREENWICH, LONDON
VICTORIAN ENGLAND





"Welcome…welcome…to the Tombola Fair!"

A young man stepped out of the shadows and stretched—bone by bone, click by click. His skin was the glow of a sleeping moon and his cool, grey eyes glinted with pride. From the streak of white hair that flashed through midnight curls, to the severe waistcoat buttoned over a vibrant purple shirt, everything about him screamed of peculiarity. His walk was as crooked as a witch's spine.

With a dip of his funeral top hat, he offered the crowd a creamy white smile. "My name, ladies and gentlemen, is Skelter Tombola!"

The crowd broke into thunderous applause. Everyone was delighted to meet a member of the world-famous Tombola family.

"Are you ready for the unexpected?" he teased. "The extraordinary? The daring?"

"Yes!" cried the jostling crowd, eager to get the opening night trivialities over with.

Warm brown furs and stern grey coats tightened against the chill of the late-November night. Children clutched their mothers' coats and were shushed for their questions, their impatient whining. Entering the fairground was all they cared about.

The crowd fell silent, mesmerised as Skelter raised a thin, bony hand and circled the air. His command of a crowd was magnetic. Mist drifted around his ankles, shrouding immaculate black boots, and crawling up immaculate cream trousers.

"Fear," he purred, "is a beautiful, *beautiful* thing. It delights your skin and makes your blood sing. I wonder, dear people of Greenwich, how much fear *you* might enjoy?"

The crowd murmured, unsure what to think of such a question. Yet they remained entranced by this charismatic figure and edged closer.

In front of Skelter was a small wooden table, on which something was hidden beneath a silver cloth.

Skelter grinned and clicked his fingers thrice, once with every word: "We…shall…see."

The creamy white candles in front of him blew out, plunging the clearing into darkness. A child whimpered; someone giggled; mothers scolded.

Snap. Snap.

The candles relit, casting an eerie glow over Skelter's face. His hand rested on the cloth, a sudden smile fluttering over his lips. "Meet the world's greatest escape artist—Monsieur Boleresco!" He pulled away the cloth with a dramatic flourish, his eyes sparkling as he waited for the crowd's reaction.

Inside the glass box was a silver spider, thrashing to break free. It was the size of a Sunday afternoon tea plate, with eyes like shiny black marbles.

The crowd gasped and stepped back.

"What kind of trick is that?" joked a man in the crowd. "Nothing amazing about a spider."

"Spiders won't harm anyone," said a mother trying to soothe her crying child. "Especially one in a box."

Snap. Snap.

The candles blew out.

Snap. Snap.

Yellow flames sprang back to life. Monsieur Boleresco had vanished.

Nervous laughter slipped among the crowd.

"Where's it gone?" shouted a young boy. "Bet you've hidden it behind your back, Mr Skelter!"

Skelter raised an eyebrow and held out empty hands. "I think not, young sir."

A sudden scream cut through the night.

"It's there!" cried a woman. "Something…something touched my leg!"

Skelter breathed in deeply, as though inhaling the sweetest of aromas. "I smell fear, good people of Greenwich. And Monsieur Boleresco is hungry. He will only return when he has finished feasting…"

"Feasting?" The woman shrieked, her son whimpering beside her.

"I can hear it!"

"Something's hissing—*moving*—in the shadows!"

"You're mad!" yelled an angry father, grabbing his child and storming away.

Skelter watched on in silence as the crowd panicked and fled, many cursing him or offering looks of pity as they hurried towards the grey iron gates of the funfair.

He reached into the glass box and picked up Monsieur Boleresco, a spider smaller than a plum and dusted in silver theatre glitter.

"Such fools, and yet what a wondrous smell of fear. How remarkable that they ran into the fair, eager to spend their money." Skelter's laughter was the crack of breaking bones. "They will understand what it's like to shiver, tremble, to be very, very afraid. Welcome, dear people of Greenwich—welcome to the Scareground!"



1
BALLOON RACE

A shadow of a girl tiptoed over the bakery rooftop. Her laughter was lighter than moonbeams, her hair the startling red of a wandering cockerel, with flashes of gold where the sun might have scorched its feathers. She wore a pinafore the blue-grey of the stormiest sea, with clotted-cream socks beneath scratched knees, now the purple of winter prunes.

Nancy Crumpet spied a row of terracotta chimney pots several rooftops away and grinned. They were classic rim chimneys—all except one. It was leprechaun gold and crafted

like a king's crown. It boasted a silver weathervane that made a squeaky whine as it spun from east to west, north to south.

"Imperious and snotty, just like old Florence Witherby," grumbled Nancy as she prepared to leap from the eaves of the bakery across to the haberdashery. She knew which slate had loosened from its groove, and how many gutters had broken because of the autumn storms. She knew how fast she needed to run to leap from rooftop to rooftop, secret antics to make the Crumpets die with fright.

Nancy Crumpet was different, see. She wasn't afraid of the world closer to the sky. It was where she felt happiest. Flour, eggs, sugar, and soda were all well and good, for helping the Crumpets was important to her. But mixing up cake batches didn't make her heart race the way playing on the rooftops did. This made her feel alive. Like she belonged.

She stormed forward, lifting off from the bakery ledge in two great leaps. The wind pinched her cheeks and swiped her ankles, only stopping when she'd landed sure-footed on the slanted roof of the butcher's, the house next door to Florence Witherby, the village school headmistress. Witherby was the reason Nancy was on the rooftop tonight, risking the wrath of the wind and the scorn of the stars.

The quarrel between dear Ma Crumpet and Florence Witherby had started over the discussion of ghosts, rumoured to exist around Oxleas Wood. "Such terrible things don't exist," Ma Crumpet had muttered. "What a load of soggy nonsense!"

Florence Witherby had paled with indignation and retorted, "Soggy nonsense? Just like your Friday loaf, Mrs Crumpet!"

"And now we shall see who ends up soggy, Florence Witherby!" grumbled Nancy. She'd seen the sadness in the baker's teaspoon-grey eyes and knew that what she was about to do was right.

Nancy scrambled up the roof until she reached the ridge, and, with her arms outstretched, feet ever sure, she walked like a tightrope artist until she reached her final dismount. A short jump away were the elegant gables trimming the roof of Florence Witherby's home; they reminded Nancy of the gingerbread house Ma Crumpet made every Christmas. With one light pounce, she landed softly on to the roof of her target.

Just as she was reaching into her backpack, something caught her eye. A balloon—as black and eerie as a storm-captured moon. It moved like a migrating swallow: twisting

and turning, shooting left, right, darting fast and slow, rising and falling…as if it *knew* where it was going. As though it had a purpose.

A balloon in winter—a *lone* balloon—was no ordinary occurrence. It made a sudden dash to the left, out towards Oxleas Wood, rising higher and higher into the clouds. Nancy's heart bumped with excitement. Surely Ma Crumpet wouldn't mind if she was a few minutes late for supper.

Keeping a careful watch on the balloon, Nancy rummaged in her backpack and pulled out a soft crumbling white ball. It was made from a quart of strong flour, half a dozen rotten eggs, and an itch of grey pigeon feathers. She wriggled on her stomach up to the ridge, towards the regal chimney, peered into its clean depths, and promptly dropped the flour sneeze bomb inside.

Not a second did she waste as she slid back down the slates to the eaves and fled, springing deftly across to the next rooftop. Witherby would skin her alive if she was caught. Even worse, the Crumpets would get into trouble. And, besides, the balloon was now two rooftops away. If she was quick, she could catch up with it.

The rain fell like icing sugar, turning the frozen shimmer of the night witch into a meddlesome slush. Nancy was

careful as she made her way over the rooftops. One bad slip and she would tumble to the streets below.

"What?" she muttered, as storm clouds scrambled above her spoiling the soft pinkness of the sky, an unusual colour for rain. "I'm only chasing a balloon!"

However, as a chilling scream rose from Florence Witherby's house, Nancy lost her footing and skidded down a third of a gable. She grasped hold of a gutter pipe and swung on to her back, glaring at the sky. "I'm fine," she muttered, cross with herself for slipping. "No one knows the rooftops better than me."

The village church was dressed in its usual finery of golden lights. Tonight, however, there was a black velvet scarf draped around its foundations. It looked like a shadow, constantly moving, surging in and out as though it were breathing.

Nancy shivered. Shadows didn't breathe. Her imagination was getting the better of her. "Where are you going, balloon?" she whispered, clambering to her feet and sliding down to the eaves. "Or are you a friend of the sky?"

The sky stormed in first with an angry burst of rain.

Nancy frowned. "I only asked. Perhaps you blew it into Greenwich."

The ledge dug into her worn black boots as she swayed gently from side to side. At first, she blamed it on an unexpected sweep of wind, until she heard music, as sweet and light as a summer sponge cake. Her blood quivered, and a rush of warmth tickled her skin. It was the prettiest sound she had ever heard.

Nancy wanted to pick up her petticoat and skip through the rain. She wanted to splatter the puddles and catch hold of the clouds. It was fairground music; she was certain of it. It made her soul dance.

"Fairs are terrible places," the bakers had whispered, as though fair folk were about to burst into the bakery kitchen and bake the Crumpets alive. "They trespass on Oxleas Wood with their rickety wagons and strange music, disturbing the peace and all. It sounds like death music, truly it does. All those organs and bells. You must promise to stay away."

How could something so beautiful cause so much fear? And it *had* caused fear. She had seen it in their eyes. She had promised Ma Crumpet she'd stay away. And promises were never broken.

For the first time that night, Nancy closed her eyes and imagined the fair. She tasted the sticky sweetness of pink

sugar candy, the mouth-watering lick of soft treacle toffee. She embraced the thunderous gallop of Arabian horses with peacock-feather plumes attached to their heads, charging around on a gold-crusted carousel with candy-cane poles rising into an umbrella roof. She heard the swoosh of great ships, with decks painted in gold. Snow-white sails spun up to the clouds, billowing over soft yellow lanterns to guide the way.

Something hissed—*whizzed*—jolting Nancy from her thoughts. She blinked once, twice. There was only darkness around her.

She climbed back up towards the ridge, scratching her knees against the roof tiles. Dismay thundered in her chest. The balloon was spiralling downwards, surrounded by what looked like black feathers. As the first feather kissed the ground, the music stopped, and the balloon disappeared in a storm of darkness—a twilight mass that whispered, "*Scareground, Scareground, Scareground.*"