A CLOCK STRIKES MURDER

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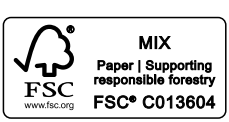
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CHAPTER ONE
THE MUSEUM OF CURSED OBJECTS

Meredith Morrow did not like the way the man was watching her. It was a look that spelled *TROUBLE*. If she had been anywhere else, she might have run, but Merry knew that at an airport, the only acceptable time to run is if you are late for your flight, and *not* when you are sensibly queuing to go through passport control.

The man's eyes slid from Merry to her passport, then across to her twin sister, Spike – real name Rose. He crooked a finger at Mum and sternly said, '*Ella*,' from beneath a bushy black moustache.

'Who's *Ella*?' Spike whispered, confused. 'Mum's name is Alice!'

'It means "come here" in Greek,' Merry replied, a little smug that, for once, she was a step ahead of Spike. She had purchased a small Greek phrasebook with her pocket money some weeks back, just after the trip had been booked.

'Twins, yes?' said the moustached man, jabbing his finger towards the sisters.

'That's right,' Mum said – very patiently, Merry thought, given that there could be no mistaking that she and Spike were twins. They were identical to look at, with mischievous blue eyes, freckled noses and unruly dark hair. The only real differences were that Spike had a wonky fringe, which she insisted on cutting herself, and a slightly grumpier expression than her sister.

'Then you explain, please, these dates of birth,' said the man. He glowered at them suspiciously from beneath black eyebrows that were almost as bushy as his moustache. 'They are not the same. The years are different!'

'Well, yes,' said Mum, pointing at the passports. 'If you look again, you'll see that Meredith was born on New Year's Eve, the last day of December, and Rose was born on New Year's Day. There are only eleven minutes between them, in fact.'

It was surprising, Merry thought, how much of a difference a frown made to someone's face. As the man glanced at the passports again, his eyebrows shot up and his moustache lifted as his face broke into a smile.

'Ah!' he said excitedly. 'I see! And this is unusual, yes?'

'Yes,' Mum agreed as the passports were handed back. 'Very unusual. The doctors said that the chances of having twins born in different years is around one in two million.'

This seemed to delight the man even further. He beamed and gestured for them to pass. 'Madam, and twins, welcome to Crete!'

Merry beamed back, then hurried after Mum, who was already marching towards a sign pointing to baggage reclaim and telling them to *chop-chop*.

'It does get rather tiresome, having to explain about your birthdays,' Mum said with a sigh, pausing briefly to tuck the passports safely back in her shoulder bag. 'If only you'd come along a few minutes earlier, Rose.'

'I'm sorry,' Spike replied sarcastically. 'Or perhaps Merry could have waited a few minutes instead of being in a rush like she always is?'

'Well, either way,' Mum said absently, scanning the overhead screens, 'it would have saved such a lot of bother.'

'Hmm,' the twins said together, sharing a glance. The truth was that their unusual birthdays – set apart between the old year and the new – was not just an odd piece of information that Mum sometimes found 'tiresome'. The twins also had a remarkable and magical effect on time – which Mum didn't know the half of.

And they were quite sure that their split birthdays were the root of it all.

'Right,' said Mum. 'Our luggage is at baggage reclaim number two.'

By the time they reached it, the conveyor belt was already chugging around, crammed with bags and pushchairs and fat suitcases. After a few minutes, the twins' large spotted suitcase trundled along, and a little way behind it was Mum's. Spike had had the idea of tying bright red ribbon to both cases so they were easy to spot. With a heft and a heave, they pulled the cases free from the conveyor belt and followed the exit signs.

They stepped outside into a searing heat that almost took Merry's breath away – she was convinced the sun here was more dazzling than ten English summers. It was now she realized that, while she'd remembered to pack some swimwear in her hand luggage, she had put her sun hat in her suitcase.

Spike, of course, could be counted on for thinking ahead. '*Oof*,' she said, fanning herself as she popped on her sunglasses. 'Now, that's *hot*!'

Squinting, Merry followed Mum, who was wheeling their suitcases to the front of a long line of taxicabs. As they waited in the queue, Mum took out a bottle of sun lotion and made them put it on. All around them, people were climbing into cars or loading bags into huge hissing coaches, which belched out hot fumes

into the already baking air. The airport was a hive of movement, but already Merry was looking beyond it into an impossibly blue and cloudless sky to rows of snow-topped mountains in the distance.

'Spike,' she breathed, shielding her eyes. 'Look! How can there be *snow* when it's the middle of summer?'

'Because it's a lot colder all that way up a mountain than it is down on the ground,' Spike replied. 'Simple.'

Within minutes, Mum had secured a taxi, and a kindly-faced driver clambered out and helped lift their luggage into the trunk.

'*Efcharistó,*' Merry told her. 'That means "thank you",' she explained with a sideways glance at Spike, who was already rolling her eyes.

'Did you swallow that phrasebook of yours?'

'No, but it might have tasted better than the plane food,' Merry said with a grin. She hadn't *really* minded that the meal wasn't very nice. She'd been thrilled to be on an aeroplane in the first place – it was the first time the twins had ever flown anywhere, and the whole thing – from waking up and travelling to the airport in the early hours while it was still dark, to the smell of strong coffee in the airport restaurants, and looking through the shops, to eventually boarding the plane as the sun rose – had been very exciting.

'Snort,' said Spike fondly. 'Knowing you, you *would* eat a book if you could.'

'Probably,' Merry agreed. She loved words. She loved making them into stories and rhymes; she enjoyed the feel of them in her mouth. She was fascinated by words that seemed to look like the thing they described, like *Bed* or *Swan.* And she loved learning new ones.

'I thought the plane food was fine,' Spike added. She had wolfed down her meal, pudding and all, and then eaten everything Merry had left. 'And that lovely roaring sound of the engines almost made me forget my tinnitus, even if my ears were popping like mad.'

They climbed into the back of the taxi. Despite the windows being down, the car was stuffy and Merry immediately began to sweat. She peeled her skin away from the seat, wishing Mum would hurry up and tell the driver where they needed to get to so they could start moving and there would at least be a breeze.

'It's in here somewhere,' Mum muttered as the driver waited patiently for a destination. 'Ah, here.' She pulled out a scrap of paper and pointed. '*Kryfí Paralía*.'

Merry stared out of the window, willing the taxi to move off. A large coach full of tourists pulled away. She sat up a little straighter as an elegant white limousine drew up alongside the arrivals sign. A limousine usually meant someone important. Almost immediately, she spotted a man striding quickly towards the vehicle. He was dressed in light clothes with a white cap pulled down so his face was half hidden, but the way he

walked oozed confidence, as though he was used to being watched. As he neared the limo, the driver got out and rushed to relieve him of his luggage. The man lifted his head, and Merry glimpsed a dark, handsome face with unusually pale eyes. He gave the limo driver a smile so dazzling that Merry almost smiled in response – until she realized she *recognized* that smile. She nudged her twin.

'Spike! That man in the cap – I know him from somewhere.'

'Can't see him properly,' said Spike as, annoyingly, the man had chosen that moment to duck his head.

'He obviously doesn't want to be recognized,' said Merry.

'Snort!' Spike said. 'Then why would he ride in a limousine?'

She had a point. All around, people were staring at the luxury car. The man was about to get into the limo when a glamorous woman approached. She wore impossibly high gold sparkly shoes and bronze shorts that showed off her tanned legs. Behind her, she pulled an enormous gold suitcase, and she, too, wore a cap. Hers was covered in shiny rhinestones that glittered in the sun. From underneath it, glossy auburn hair streamed behind her. Though the cap partially hid her face, Merry could just make out a sulky, lipsticked mouth. As the man and the woman spoke, they appeared to be arguing.

'Wonder what that's about?' said Spike.

Merry wondered too – but she was more interested in working out why the man was familiar. She was so busy watching them that it took her a moment to realize how hot she had become, and that the taxi had still not moved. In the front, Mum and the driver were continuing to examine Mum's scrap of paper.

In the rear-view mirror, Merry saw an uncertain look flicker in the taxi driver's eyes.

'I think this is a mistake,' she said slowly. 'Do you mean *Mystikí Ammoudía*? Because in English, it has a similar meaning: "Secret Sands". But this is far from here. Very far.'

'Er, no,' said Mum, tapping the paper. '*This* is the right place, I'm quite sure.'

The driver didn't look sure at all. She tried again, struggling to find the words in English. 'But this place, it is . . . You cannot get there any longer. There is – how do you say . . . *empódio*.'

'I don't know what that means,' Mum said apologetically. 'Merry, what does it say in your phrasebook?'

'Er . . .' Merry said, unsure of the spelling of the foreign word as she flicked though the pages in the Greek to English section of the book. Merry had been delighted to find that the Greek language had a different alphabet, which seemed almost as mystical and as beautiful as

Egyptian hieroglyphs. She had decided at once that she wanted to learn it – but for now, the unfamiliar letters only added to her confusion.

'*Empódio*,' the driver repeated. 'I can get you close, but not all the way.'

'Close is good enough,' Mum said brightly.

'Okay,' said the taxi driver with a shrug. She started the engine. 'We go.'

Merry cast another glance back at the bickering couple as the car moved off. She was just in time to see the woman stamping her foot and, as Merry looked, she caught another glimpse of the man's face. Something clicked into place.

'Oh!' she exclaimed in excitement. 'I know who that is! It's *Duke Rowley*!'

'Duke Rowley?' Spike turned back, frowning, but by now the couple was too far away for her to get a proper look. 'You mean the one who's in that silly TV show you're always watching – what's it called . . . *Sunshine* something?'

Merry nodded vigorously, still unable to believe her eyes. '*Sunshine and Secrets!* And it's not silly. Every episode ends in a cliffhanger. And Leo Harrington – that's Duke's character – always has the biggest storylines. He was framed for a murder he didn't commit, and so he went on the run and faked his own death. It's addictive!' She sat back in her seat as the taxi smoothly sped away

from the airport. To think she'd been so close to Duke Rowley and missed him by a whisker!

'If only we'd been a minute or so later,' she said dolefully. 'I could've asked for his autograph.'

'I doubt he'd have given it to you,' Spike said at once. 'I reckon he's totally obnoxious. I read in the newspaper that he had a hissy fit when a family approached him in a restaurant and asked for a photo with him.'

'I'm sure that's not true,' Merry muttered, feeling her cheeks go pink.

'I bet it is,' Spike said. 'Just because he's handsome and plays a charming character, doesn't mean Duke Rowley is like that in real life.'

Merry pursed her lips and turned to stare out of the window again. She didn't like to admit it, but Spike could be right. Still, it was exciting to have seen him in real life.

For the next hour, the taxi journeyed through the Cretan countryside, passing olive groves and churches, and pure white villas covered in vivid pink flowers that Mum pointed out as something called bougainvillea. There was far less traffic than in England, and at times their taxi was the only car on the road. Now and then, Merry glimpsed quaint little structures at the roadside which looked like miniature churches. They contained objects like religious paintings and figurines, candles and photographs. The driver explained that these were shrines dedicated to the memories of those who had

died in – or survived – road accidents in these spots.

'Oh!' Merry exclaimed, noticing something which had been niggling at her. 'The driver is on the other side of the car in Greece!'

'And on the other side of the road,' Spike said. 'Just like they are in American films.'

Before long, they were driving alongside a golden beach edged with little restaurants.

'Can't we stop, Mum?' Spike begged, gazing at the sea. 'Just for a while? Look how blue that water is!'

Mum shook her head firmly. 'Yiannis is expecting us. We can't be late.'

'Yiannis – he is your friend?' asked the driver.

'Yes,' Mum replied. 'An old friend from years ago. We met at art school. I'm here to do some work for him for the next few weeks.'

Soon the beach was behind them, and as the car made its way along a road set into the hills, winding perilously near to the edge, Merry had to force herself to not look too closely for fear the car would topple off and fall down the cliffside. After several minutes of climbing dizzyingly higher, the taxi veered off down a narrow track and began a sharp descent to lower ground. Very soon, Merry grew concerned.

'Spike,' she whispered, as the view around them stretched into nothing but parched land. 'I think we're lost.'

Spike said nothing, but her lips tightened. Even Mum was starting to look alarmed. The driver continued along the road, winding this way and that until the car eventually stopped by a tall cliff. Ahead, the road had ended abruptly, blocked by an enormous pile of rubble. To the side, a dusty black truck was parked off the road, but no one was inside it. Several signs had been put up nearby, and while they were all in Greek, the symbols were unmistakable: DANGER! LANDFALL! DO NOT PASS.

'We have arrived,' said the driver, helpfully gesturing to the pile of rocks.

Mum blinked in horror. 'H-here?'

'*Naí*.' The driver nodded firmly. 'Yes. Just as I tell you. *Empódio* . . . Ah, in English, yes, I remember now – "obstruction".'

'Is this really it, Mum?' Merry asked.

'Er . . .' Mum said, checking her piece of paper. 'Well, I think so. Yiannis said he'd meet us here, but we're a few minutes late.' She pulled out a handful of notes to pay the driver. Moments later, their luggage had been unloaded and they were standing alone at the roadside as the taxi roared away in a cloud of dust.

Then Spike pointed. 'Who's that?'

A man had appeared through the dust cloud. Merry glanced round. Where had he come from? It was as though he'd been conjured up out of nowhere.

'Oh, thank goodness.' Mum sighed with relief and

waved, calling to him. 'Yianni!'

'I thought his name was Yiannis?' Spike said, puzzled. 'With an "s" on the end?'

'It is,' Mum explained. 'But when you're speaking to someone who's Greek, you don't pronounce the "s" at the end of their name.'

'Alice, my friend!' the man exclaimed. He was large and hairy with tanned skin and friendly brown eyes. He swept Mum into a bone-crunching hug, and the twins then had their cheeks enthusiastically pinched by the excitable Greek man.

'*Ella*,' he said, beaming. He had a deep, rumbling voice that made Merry think of bear growls and thunder. 'It's wonderful to see you!' He checked his watch. 'My other guests have not arrived yet, but I am so happy you're here – it's *very* exciting! I cannot wait to show you the *Spíti ton Kataraménon Antikeiménon*.'

Merry felt a tingle of anticipation. Mum had told them all about the Museum of Cursed Objects. It was a spooky collection of items that were supposedly haunted or cursed, and which Yiannis took extremely seriously. But it was one thing hearing about it, and another to be visiting in person.

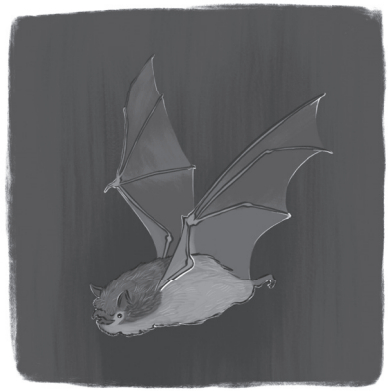
'Where exactly *is* it, though?' Spike asked, staring at the huge rubble barrier.

'Aha!' Yiannis snapped his fingers and grinned. 'I will show you. *Ella*. Follow me.'

Yiannis hoisted up the two suitcases as though they weighed no more than a couple of picnic baskets, and the Morrows followed him along the edge of the rubble towards the rocky cliff face. Grit crunched under their shoes and a warm wind brought the sound of gulls to Merry's ears, though she could not see the sea in any direction. As they neared the cliff, Yiannis began to hum a little tune, but there was still nothing visible ahead to show where he might be taking them. Merry began to wonder whether he was quite mad. And then, a few steps on, as they rounded a ridge, a small, dark opening around the size of a normal front door appeared within the cliff face, revealing a set of narrow steps leading downward.

'*What*?' Mum blurted out, wide-eyed. 'You want us to go in there?'

Yiannis nodded, his smile widening. '*Naí.* The first adventure. To get to the museum, we must go through the caves!'



CHAPTER TWO

CAVES!

Merry and Spike glanced at each other in astonishment and delight. Caves? This *was* exciting! Mum plainly didn't agree, nibbling her lip nervously as the twins peered through the craggy opening in the cliff. Unsure what to expect, Merry found that she could see nothing at all beyond the steps: after the brightness of the Mediterranean sun, the entrance to the caves appeared pitch dark. All she could detect was a musty smell and the sound of faint echoing drips from within. If she were a gloomy sort of person, she might have said the opening to the caves looked like a coffin.

A piercing whistle drew their attention back to the

road. Spike, who had sensitive ears, immediately put her fingers in them at the sharp noise. Merry turned. A flash of sunlight bounced off a long, sleek car. *A white limousine . . .*

Her breath caught. It couldn't possibly be – could it . . .?

Duke Rowley and the auburn-haired woman in gold shoes were standing by the car. Duke raised a hand in greeting.

'G'day!' he called in a strong Australian accent. 'Are you Yianni?'

'I don't believe it,' Merry murmured. 'Duke Rowley is *here*!'

'Ah, *naí*,' said Yiannis, waving back. 'Mr Rowley. He is famous, yes?'

'Yes,' Merry said, heart fluttering. 'In England, *very* famous.'

Yiannis strode to the limo and began speaking to the pair. Spike unplugged her ears. 'What's *he* doing here?'

'He can't be lost,' Merry said at once. 'He just asked for Yiannis.' Her heart went from a flutter to a gallop as Yiannis, Duke and the auburn-haired woman came towards them.

'Alice, Meredith and Rose Morrow, meet Duke Rowley and Araminta Blumenkratz,' said Yiannis, setting down two more suitcases next to those of the Morrows. 'You are all my esteemed guests.'

'G'day.' Duke tipped his cap at Mum and smiled charmingly, revealing a set of extraordinarily white teeth.

'Nice to meet you,' said Mum in her usual vague way that suggested she didn't have the foggiest idea who Duke Rowley was and hadn't heard a word of her daughters' conversation.

Duke turned to the twins and winked at each of them. 'Wotcha.'

'Wotcha,' Merry said faintly, unable to believe their luck. 'Are you friends of Yiannis?' she asked shyly.

'This is the first time we've met in person,' Duke replied. 'We're here on a little business, actually.' He gave Yiannis a chummy glance. 'But I'm sure we'll part as friends.'

Araminta politely bared her teeth at them, and Merry felt her own smile freeze on her lips as the glamorous woman's gaze passed over Mum, with her unbrushed hair and paint-speckled clothes. Araminta's pretty mouth slid into a sneer. She tossed her head, her long, shiny hair fanning around her shoulders. 'People call me Minty,' she said in an accent that sounded like it might be German.

Yiannis gestured to the cave mouth. 'As you can see, the museum cannot be accessed by road. So we must go through the caves, and before we do, we will ask for safe passage from Hermes.'

Minty gave an impatient tut. 'Who is this Hermes? Will they be long? It's very hot!'

'Hermes is a Greek god,' Spike said.

Yiannis beamed approvingly. '*Naí*. The protector of travellers. We ask for his protection as we journey through caves.'

'*Protection*?' Mum asked, eyeing the cave entrance doubtfully. 'Is this safe, Yianni?'

Yiannis waved a hand. 'I do it every day.'

'That's not what I asked,' Mum muttered, but Yiannis had already moved on, producing a handful of brown strings from his pocket. He passed one to each of them, and as Merry accepted hers, she saw that it was a necklace made from a length of leather, with a blue glass bead hanging from it. At the centre of the blue glass was a painted eye.

'Ugh. What *is* this tacky thing?' Minty muttered, holding the necklace between her thumb and forefinger disapprovingly.

Fortunately, Yiannis did not seem to have heard.

'We call this talisman the *mati*,' he explained. 'The evil eye. It looks for danger around you, and will keep you safe from harm. You must wear these in the caves.' He hesitated. 'And maybe in the museum, too. Just to be safe.'

After instructing them to repeat a string of Greek words, which Yiannis explained was a blessing, he ushered them towards the cave mouth.

'Minty's pretty, isn't she?' Merry whispered to Spike.

She wondered if she was Duke's girlfriend.

Spike shrugged. 'I suppose so. In an evil sort of way.'

One by one, they went through the narrow cave entrance. At once, the air changed from dry heat into cool dampness, but before their eyes had had time to adjust to the dimness, a bright light came on. Yiannis had put on a blue hard hat, from which the light shone out. From a crate just inside the entrance, he handed each of them a white hat and helped them adjust the straps and switch on their own lights. After that, they were each fitted with a life jacket before being led across an uneven rocky surface to a wooden platform, next to which a narrow boat bobbed on crystal-clear water that cut through the rock.

'Whoa,' said Spike, looking upward. Now they were further inside, the cave had opened up and the ceiling above them was high. The walls glistened damply with mineral formations. Stalactites hung down from above, sometimes meeting stalagmites from below to form columns, giving the whole place the feel of an enchanted grotto. Once again Merry became aware of a slow dripping sound, which echoed faintly around them. It felt as though they had stepped into a secret world.

'It's beautiful,' she murmured as they stepped into the boat. And it was. So beautiful that she forgot to look at Duke Rowley – or wonder what his 'business' with Yiannis was – for another whole minute.

Once everyone was seated in the boat, Yiannis unmoored it and used a paddle to push off. The boat cut across the water, making soft rippling sounds as it moved through the channel that took them through the caves.

'What about our belongings?' Minty called, glancing back to the cave entrance. Her voice echoed around them eerily. 'Can we bring *my* case, at least? I'm sure it will fit. I have a very valuable—'

'I will return for all the luggage,' said Yiannis. 'Please, sit back and enjoy the beauty of the caves.'

Minty sat back, glowering.

'Have we met before?' Mum asked, watching Duke curiously. 'You look familiar somehow—'

'Mum!' Merry whispered urgently, her face burning in embarrassment. 'Weren't you listening earlier? It's—'

'Leo Harrington,' Duke cut in with a charming smile. His white teeth flashed in the dim light. 'That's my character's name. From *Sunshine and Secrets*? That's most likely where you've seen me. Primetime TV. Winner of the Best Daytime Show two years running, and Best Actor at this year's awards – yours truly, that is.'

'Oh.' Mum looked baffled. 'I don't watch much television, I'm afraid. Are you often in the news? Perhaps it was on a fish and chips paper I saw your face.'

'*Mum!*' Merry hissed, mortified. She was surprised Mum had recognized Duke at all. She was always so busy painting that she made little time for anything else. But

then, Duke *was* very handsome. It was hard not to notice him with his perfect teeth and piercing light blue eyes.

'Are you Duke's girlfriend?' Spike blurted out, watching Minty closely. 'We saw the two of you at the airport.'

Merry cringed at the bluntness of the question, though she had been wondering the same thing. Over the past few months, Duke had been linked to a string of beautiful women – actresses, singers and models – but each time he had claimed they were 'just friends'. Merry held her breath as they waited for Minty's reply, but Duke responded first.

He chuckled and slapped his knee so hard the boat shook a little, and the slap sounded once more in an echo.

'*Girlfriend*? Oh, no. Funny story – Miss Blumenkratz mistook my car for hers at the airport. We had, uh, a little quibble about whose driver it was, but when we realized we were heading for the same place, we decided to share.'

'Oh.' Merry was a little surprised. She'd been sure Duke and Minty were a couple, but perhaps Minty was unhappy about the suggestion, for her expression darkened and she folded her arms and stared over the side of the boat.

'How long before we are through the caves?' Minty asked, fiddling with her hard hat. 'My hair is going flat.'

'It isn't,' Spike said in a sweet voice Merry knew to be insincere. 'It's going quite fluffy at the ends, actually.'

'Fluffy?' Minty grabbed her long hair and immediately began to plait it.

Spike snickered, muttering to herself under her breath. 'Is there anything she's not going to moan about?'

Shortly, the caves narrowed and they had to duck their heads to avoid hitting them on jutting rock and stalactites. Then quite suddenly the ceiling opened up again into a larger cavern.

'The water flowing through the caves is from cold underground springs that lead into the sea,' said Yiannis. 'The entrance was only discovered around thirty years ago when a man out walking lost his dog, and later found him at one of the cave openings.'

'What's that for?' Spike pointed to a length of blue string. Merry hadn't noticed it before, but now she saw it was fastened above the waterline and led through the caves. 'Is it to mark out the route?' Spike asked.

'Naí.' Yiannis nodded vigorously. 'Well spotted! Yes, it shows us the way safely through to the other side.'

'What about that one?' Spike had noticed a red string that was further away and on the opposite side to the blue one. 'Is that a different route?'

'Ah,' said Yiannis. 'Yes. That route is different – only for experienced people, like me. It is for emergencies only, in case of rockfalls.' He gently steered the boat into a wider area of water. Ahead, there were two tunnels leading into darkness. 'Now, here, I have something very exciting for

you. Will everyone please turn off the lights on their hats?'

The group exchanged dubious glances then, one by one, did as Yiannis had asked. Minty's was the last to go out, leaving them in an impossible darkness.

'Now we must be very still,' Yiannis said quietly. 'And not say a word.'

Merry reached for Spike in the darkness, holding her twin's hand tightly. What on earth were they waiting for? Even though Yiannis had promised them something exciting – and he'd certainly sounded excited himself – she couldn't shake the feeling that they were hiding from something. A story Mum used to tell her and Spike popped into her head: it was about a labyrinth of caves and a terrible monster called a minotaur, which lived inside them.

Almost immediately the air filled with fluttery, whispery sounds of movement. Spike's fingers tightened around Merry's. What was that noise? There was a cold whip of air on Merry's face as something zipped past her, hearing the flap of small wings. *Lots* of small wings.

'Bats,' said Yiannis, breaking the spell as he switched on his light. He wore a delighted grin. 'We have many species here!'

As the lights all came back on, Merry searched above them but saw – and heard – nothing. The bats had vanished as quickly as they had arrived, and she couldn't help feeling relieved.

'Ugh!' Minty exclaimed. 'Horrible things!'

'They aren't horrible,' Spike retorted. 'They're very important, actually.'

Minty narrowed her eyes. 'I do not like them.'

'Do you like gnat bites?' Spike asked. 'Because some bats can eat over a thousand mosquitoes an hour.'

Merry squeezed her twin's hand proudly.

'Fascinating,' Minty said coldly, looking at Spike rather like she was a gnat herself.

A few minutes later, Yiannis moored the boat to a wooden post and beckoned them off.

'We have arrived,' he said, helping them step on to a second wooden platform. 'Please mind your feet and your heads.'

They followed Yiannis along a narrowing rocky passage that squeezed so thin that they had to go single file, and even though Merry ducked, she still felt a light bump as her hat scraped the cave roof. She was glad when dazzling sunshine appeared around the next corner and, after removing their hard hats and returning them to Yiannis, they were out into the warm, dry air.

At once, Merry became aware of a strange, high-pitched noise all around them, like thousands of tiny chirps in an enormous chorus. But she couldn't see anything that could be making it.

'What *is* that sound?' Spike asked in wonder. 'It sounds a bit like . . .'

'Crickets?' Merry suggested.

'Cicadas,' said Yiannis with a big smile. 'They are an insect. You like their song?'

'It's lovely,' said Mum.

'So, are you guys here for the business, too?' asked Duke with a curious glance at Mum and the twins. 'I'm guessing there are a few of us.'

'Er, well,' said Mum, 'I'm here to do some repairs on an old painting for Yiannis. I work in art restoration.'

'Wow!' said Duke, looking genuinely impressed. 'That's cool.'

Merry felt her eyebrows lift. 'Cool' was not a word that she'd heard used to describe Mum – not ever.

'Thank you,' Mum replied, looking pleased. 'And yourself? What sort of business are you here for? I hope we won't be in the way.'

Duke laughed easily. 'I'm sure it'll all be groovy.'

'*Naí*,' said Yiannis. 'Alice's studio will be set up in a quiet room overlooking the sea. It's no problem!' He herded them up a steep stone path away from the caves, seeming slightly anxious now.

Duke and Minty exchanged odd looks, and Merry knew Spike had noticed too. Neither of them had answered Mum's question, and Merry wondered, uneasily, exactly what kind of business might be taking place in a museum full of cursed objects.