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Opening extract from

The Gypsy Crown

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The Owl Cried

Thornton Heath, Surrey, England
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"I heard the owl cry last night," Maggie Finch said, her gnarled hands clenched on her shawl. "That means a death to come."

Stooped, black-eyed, with a high-bridged nose and wild grizzled hair, Maggie was often called the Queen of the Gypsies, for her fame as a fortune-teller had spread wide. "I don't think you should go to the fair today," she said. "Stay safe in the woods."

All her grandchildren cried out in disappointment. "No, Baba! Let us go to the fair! We've never been before. Let us go!"

Only Emilia did not protest. A thin, brown girl with tangled black curls, she was crouched at the foot of an oak tree, trying to coax a squirrel to come and take an acorn from her hand. Emilia was a wheedler, a charmer, a whistler of animals, what the gypsies called a *gule romni*. She could cozen a halfpenny from the meanest

fishwife, a smile from farmers, and birds from the tree into her hand. It was a gift much prized by the Rom.

Much as Emilia longed to go to the fair, she believed absolutely in her grandmother's premonitions. "You heard what Baba said. The cry of the owl means death. . ."

". . . for mice and voles," her cousin Luka said, grinning.

Emilia rolled her eyes. Of all of her family, Luka was the one who paid the least heed to their baba, often forgetting the respect she was due as *shuvani* of the tribe. He was as curious and cheeky as his monkey, Zizi, who crouched on his shoulder as always, pushing his hat to a rakish angle so she could hold on to his ear with her paw.

"But we need to raise the bride money for Beatrice somehow," Luka's father, Jacob, said, the worry-lines on his weather-beaten face deeper than ever. "How else are we to raise the money if we don't go to the fair?"

Emilia's sister Beatrice blushed pink as a peony. Jacob gave her a reassuring smile. "You're worth every penny, darling girl," he said. "Don't you fret."

"I'd feel safer if we just went back to Norwood," Maggie said. "The squire will give us work."

"Aye, digging ditches for a few pennies a day," Jacob said. "It'll take us a year to raise the gold for Beatrice. Yet if we go into Kingston on fair day, we could earn ten times as much, twenty times as much, if we're lucky. It's the only market for miles around, you know that.

Sweetheart can dance, and Luka can play his fiddle, and you can tell the *gorgios'* fortunes. . ."

"I will not go to town today," Maggie said. "I tell you, death lies ahead."

Jacob was silent. "For us?" he asked at last.

Maggie looked slowly round at them all. "Nay. I don't see the shadow on any of you. But still I think you shouldn't go. The Rom should keep to the Rom."

"Except none of the Rom have gold in their pockets," Jacob pointed out. "We won't go for long. Just a little wander through to test the temper of the town."

"It's market day," Luka cried. "Everyone's happy on market day, aren't they?"

"There are some people in this world who are never happy," Maggie replied.

"Then we need to go to the fair to cheer them up," Luka declared. He seized his fiddle from the ground and played an infectious tune. At once Zizi leapt off his shoulder and began to turn rapid cartwheels all around the camp. A huge brown bear that lay sleeping in the shade sat up, then got ponderously to her feet, her eyes brightening in anticipation. For Sweetheart the bear, music meant dancing, and dancing meant applause and praise and nice things to eat.

The joyful music lifted everyone's spirits.

"There'd be fish from the river," Jacob said. "Happen we could barter with the fishmongers."

"Sweets," Luka's little sister, Mimi, cried, clasping her hands together.

"I need some new clothes for Emilia," Luka's mother, Silvia, said. "I do wish you'd not run wild in the woods, Milly! You're not a boy, you shouldn't go climbing trees and galloping that horse of yours around as if you were."

Emilia and Luka grinned at each other. They were only three weeks apart in age and had been brought up together as brother and sister, since both Emilia's parents were dead. Luka's parents were sorry for Emilia and her family, and so were always kind and indulgent towards them. Two years older than Emilia, Beatrice was a sweet, biddable girl, quite content to stay near the campfire with her Aunt Silvia, while Emilia's younger brother, Noah, liked to stay where the sounds and smells were familiar, since he had lost his sight when he was four, from the smallpox that had killed the children's mother.

Emilia was quite as adventurous as Luka, however. The two of them spent their days roaming the forest, tickling for trout in the streams, making bows and arrows out of bits of old sticks and practising their handstands and cartwheels, Emilia hitching her skirts up in her sash.

"But is it safe?" Beatrice asked. "I don't want you all to risk yourselves for me. I don't need to get married right away. Sebastien and I can wait." She hesitated a little over the name of her betrothed, who belonged to another gypsy clan, the Hernes. Sebastien and Beatrice had met only the night before.

"You're fifteen already," Silvia scolded. "High time you were married."

"The Major-General is gone," Jacob said. "Surely the people of Kingston will be glad for a bit of song and dance after all the gloom of these last few years? It used to be a merry town, I remember."

"It's not as if it's a Roundhead town," Luka said, "with a name like *King*ston."

Everyone snorted with laughter. So many inns and villages had changed their names after the civil war that a great deal of confusion had been caused all over the country. No one wanted to be considered Royalist, though, with Cromwell and his army rounding up and beheading anyone who expressed sympathy for the dead king.

"Daya, you've got all those baskets you made this summer," Mimi said to her mother. "You could maybe sell the lot."

"If we leave now, we'll be home by sunset," Silvia said, untying her apron from about her waist. Everyone knew that she was the true power in the family, despite her soft figure and sweet face. All the children began to shout with joy and Luka turned cartwheels all round the camp, Zizi tumbling head over heels behind him. She did not know why Luka was so excited, but she shared in all his emotions as always.

Emilia had never been to a market fair. She had been only four years old when the old king had had his head cut off, and they had not travelled away from the Great North Wood since. She had never even seen a big town. She could not help smiling as she ran to change her

skirt. She had only two, a patched brown one for everyday wear, and a pink flounced skirt of many colours, for feast days and special occasions.

A year ago the Finch family would not have risked leaving the safety of the wood. Life had always been hard for the gypsies, who lived to their own rhythm and their own rules, but since Oliver Cromwell had seized control, life had been drabber, and more dangerous, than ever. Under his rule, it was not safe or seemly to love bright colours, nor music, nor dancing, nor magic, nor any of the things that the gypsies most loved, and which made them who they were.

Under Lord Protector Cromwell, the land was controlled by twelve Major-Generals. It had been their job to arrest anyone found singing or swearing or drinking or dancing. Christmas had been banned, and the smell of roast goose on Christmas Day would bring the Major-Generals to break down the door and arrest all those feasting within. Maypoles had been cut down all over the country, theatres had been closed, and horseracing and football were banned. It was said the Major-Generals even patrolled the streets, making women scrub their faces free of make-up. In Suffolk, thirteen gypsies had been hanged simply for being gypsies.

Yet the Major-Generals were gone now. Cromwell had been forced to dismiss them or lose the support of the common people. The Finch family had heard accounts of maypoles being put up in spring. If people dared to dance about a maypole, which the Puritans thought a

most ungodly thing to do, surely it could do no harm for the Rom to mingle with the crowds at the fair, and maybe sing a song or two?

So Beatrice and Mimi chattered and giggled as they plaited their hair, and Emilia groomed her mare, Alida, until she shone. Luka combed his hair for the first time in quite a long while, and then combed Zizi's hair too, much to her delight. Jacob oiled his moustache and polished the ring through Sweetheart's snout, while Silvia busied herself gathering together all the goods she had made to barter.

"Bye, Baba!" Emilia cried, and gave her grandmother a fierce hug.

"I don't like this plan of going to the fair. Who put the idea into Luka's head?"

"Sebastien's cousin, Nadine," Emilia said. "You know, the one that kept on commenting how shabby our caravans were. I didn't like her much at all."

"Jealous of our Beatrice's beauty, no doubt," Maggie replied. "Oh well, keep yourself safe, darling girl. Make sure Sweetheart is kept on a tight chain. She's not used to crowds, and if she lashes out at anyone, there'll be trouble for sure."

"You worry too much, Baba!" Luka said with a grin, coming up with Zizi swinging from his hand.

"That goes for your monkey too. Make sure she doesn't go stealing any fruit or sweets; the merchants don't like thieves, no matter how small. And you, Luka, keep your sticky fingers in your pocket!"

Luka's grin faded. "I'm not going to steal anything," he said indignantly. "I won't need to. We're going to make a fortune! Nadine said they love travelling performers at these fairs."

"That may have been true once, but not any more," Maggie said. "Nowadays they'll whip you just for kicking a ball around on a Sunday. . ."

"Well, today's Thursday, so no problem there," Luka replied with a wide grin.

"Cheeky monkey," Maggie said. He bowed theatrically, sweeping off his hat.

"We'll be fine, Baba, don't you worry," Emilia said. "Don't we have Rollo to guard us?"

"One dog is not much good against a whole marketplace of angry merchants," Maggie replied dourly.

"We won't stay long," Emilia promised.

"Just long enough to fill our pockets with gold!" Luka exulted. "Come on, Milly! The day's a-wasting!" He bounded away towards the road, his monkey gripping his neck and shrieking with joy.

Emilia vaulted on to Alida's back, and raced after him. The mare was dapple-grey, with an arched neck and a silky tail that she carried high so it rippled behind her like a white banner. Emilia's mother had always said that the horses of Arabia were made by God from the fierce desert wind because He wanted to make a creature that could fly without wings. Since her mare ran so lightly and fluidly it seemed as if she flew, Emilia had named her Alida, which meant "winged".

The rest of the Finch family followed eagerly, leading the bear by a chain attached to the ring in her nose. After more than an hour of walking, they came to a stream crossing the road. Luka felt the squelching of the mud between his toes and grinned. He jumped into the stream, spraying water everywhere.

"Nay, don't, I'll be drenched!" Beatrice cried. "I don't want to turn up at the fair all wet and muddy!"

"Here, allow me, my fine lady," Luka said. He bowed mockingly, sweeping his hand through the water so it sprayed all over her. Beatrice shrieked with indignation.

A black carriage, pulled by four black horses, galloped round the bend in the road. At once the children pressed back into the hedgerow, Rollo growling deep in his throat.

The coach raced through the stream, a great gush of muddy water rising up and wetting the children from head to foot. Luka saw a black heron of a man lean forward, frowning in disapproval at the sight of their vivid clothes and wild hair. As the carriage rattled on, the black-clad man leant out of the window to stare back at them.

Emilia stood gazing after the coach. All the hairs on her arms stood erect and quivering. She trembled as if a bitter-cold wind had blown over her.

"A devil of a man, a devil," she whispered. "I wish he had not seen us."

"It's nothing." Beatrice tried to smile. "A pastor anxious for his supper, no more. Come on! Let's hurry.

I'm hungry too. We can get something to eat at the fair."

"Pork pies, corn-on-the-cob, honey cakes," Luka chanted.

"Really?" Noah said. "I've never had a pork pie."

"Neither have I," Luka admitted. "But I bet they taste good."

They all smiled, and walked on. Except Emilia. She stood still, her hands clenched, Alida standing quietly beside her.

Emilia had felt this dark shadow before, several times. Usually it was vague, a blotting out of warmth and colour like a cloud passing before the sun. Once, though, it had been bitter and icy like this, as if a bough had bent and dumped its load of snow upon her.

It had been a few months ago. The Finches had been haymaking at Whitehorse Manor. It had been a warm, soft, burnished day, yet suddenly Emilia had felt a cold that struck to the very marrow. She had cried out, and stopped still where she stood, seeing a shadow falling through the air, hearing a thump, feeling the impact reverberating through the soles of her feet. Only an instant; then it was gone. Emilia had glanced wildly about her. Ahead was the cart, a young farmhand riding high on the hay. Suddenly the cart lurched. The farmhand lost his balance, tumbled sideways, slid down the precarious mountain of hay, and fell heavily just in front of the great iron wheel. It rolled inexorably over him, the crack of his bones as loud as a firing shot.

Her grandmother had said it was a sign that she was to be a true *drabardi*, someone who saw genuine visions of the future, rather than most fortune-tellers, who told only what their listener most wanted to hear. Maggie had the gift herself, and thought it more an affliction then a blessing. It was a rare person who truly wanted to know what lay ahead of them, Maggie said.

Feeling that dreadful creeping chill again, Emilia could only agree.

Crow-Fair

"Come on, Milly!" Beatrice turned to call to her sister.

"Are you all right?" Luka fell back and waited for her.

"I felt the shadow again," she whispered. "Something bad's going to happen."

Luka looked uncomfortable. He did not like to hear such talk. "Baba's just got you spooked with all her talk of owls crying. Nothing bad's going to happen!"

"I hope not," Emilia muttered. She did not know what to think about these strange feelings that sometimes came upon her. Maggie said it took years for a *drabardi* to learn what was true, and what was merely a trick of the mind. Emilia pushed the sense of doom away firmly, determined to enjoy the road unrolling beneath her feet, the prospect of fun ahead.

It was late morning by the time the Finch family came into Kingston-upon-Thames, a large town made

prosperous by the building of Hampton Court Palace just across the river. The streets were crowded with wagons and carts, and people pushed and shoved all around. There was a girl herding along a flock of geese, a long switch in her hand, and several boys carried big baskets of corn and vegetables. A man dragged along a cart filled with crates of baby goats. The air rang with shouts, honks, cackles, bleats and barks.

Luka and Emilia were wide-eyed, fascinated by the hustle and bustle. Zizi clung to Luka's neck, her tail wrapped about his throat, while Emilia kept a tight hold on Alida's lead rein.

"Why don't we all split up?" Jacob suggested. "We can make four times as much money then! We'll meet at the clock tower at noon, all right?"

He headed off down a side street towards a busy-looking inn, Sweetheart lumbering along behind him, her snout lifted to sniff the air. Mimi went with them, a beribboned tambourine in her hand. A large crowd soon gathered to watch Sweetheart dance, rising high on her hind paws.

Beatrice and Noah found a cool spot near the church, at the far end of the market square. It was a dour, grey church, built of flint and stone, with a tall square tower topped with a wooden roof, and a narrow avenue of gloomy yew trees that led through a few crooked gravestones. Quite a few people had gathered there, out of the sun. Rollo lay down at Noah's feet, panting, as the little boy lifted his violin to his chin. As Luka and Emilia

went deeper into the market, they could hear Beatrice's clear voice raised in an old ballad.

Luka found a stall where a wood-carver was selling puppets and dolls and rocking-horses. A mob of small children were hanging around, playing with all the toys. It seemed a good place to begin, and so Luka played his fiddle and Emilia danced and clapped her hands and snapped her fingers and stamped her feet, her skirts belling out. Zizi danced too, shrieking with excitement, and Alida delighted the crowd by lifting high her forelegs in time to the music. When the song came to an end, Alida bowed deeply, sliding her cheek down her foreleg. Everyone clapped, and quite a few people dropped coins into the hat that Zizi carried, bounding around. Emilia scooped them out and put them away in her hidden pocket.

By the time the sun was nearing the midpoint, they had more coins than Emilia had ever seen before. Flushed with success, they bought themselves a hot pie each, and went wandering through the fair.

"Look, there's Tom Whitehorse!" Emilia cried.

Luka made a face. "Stuck-up snob."

"You're just jealous," Emilia said. "You'd be stuck-up too if your father was the local squire and you had servants waiting on you hand and foot all the time. I like him."

"Well, you only like him because he admires Alida," Luka shot back.

She grinned. "He has very good taste."

The boy hurrying towards them through the crowd

was tall and fair, with long curls hanging past his shoulder, a velvet coat trimmed with lace, and a large feathered hat. He kept looking behind him as if worried he was being followed. Suspecting he had come to the fair without his father's permission, Luka grinned and stepped forward, crying in a loud voice, "Master Whitehorse! Fancy seeing you here! Where are your footmen? I'm surprised you don't have one holding a parasol over you today, it's so hot."

Tom Whitehorse flushed angrily. "Don't be silly. I don't need a parasol."

"But surely you need someone to carry your handkerchief for you? And a little basket of sweetmeats in case you get peckish?"

"I don't have time for this," Tom answered and went to brush past them.

"Don't mind Luka. You know he likes to tease. We're just surprised to see you here at the fair, since your father normally likes to keep you so close. Has he given you leave for the day?"

"Sort of," Tom answered. He glanced round anxiously and went to hurry past them.

Luka, however, gave a crow of laughter. "You've given him the slip, haven't you? Good on you!"

"Not at all," Tom replied coolly. "I'm here on my father's business."

"What a shame," Emilia said. "It's fair day! You should be having some fun."

"Fun!" Tom said scornfully. "There's not much fun to

be had in England these days, is there? Can't raise a toast to an absent friend, or choose the way you wear your hair."

Luka looked at Tom's long curls critically and said, "Well, the Lord Protector's got it right about the unloveliness of lovelocks!"

Tom glared at him. "I'm not going to cut my hair just because Cromwell tells us to! Why should I? My father says the whole world is coming to ruin, and he's right! We should never have let them kill the king."

Emilia bit back a little gasp, and glanced about them quickly. It was not wise to say such things. She noticed a soldier squinting suspiciously at them from under the shadow of a canopy. He was big and burly, with a grey-bristled chin and a nose that looked like it had been spread flat by being pressed against too many windows. He wore a buff coat and a steel gauntlet on his left hand, and had a pistol and a dagger thrust through his broad leather belt.

"Sssh!" she hissed. "Do you want your tongue nailed to the pillory?"

Tom looked round himself too, and stiffened when he saw the soldier watching. "I have to go," he said at once and, without a word of farewell, went hurrying away into the crowd.

"Well," Luka said. "Our fine young cock was rather ruffled today, wasn't he? Probably scared someone would tell on him to his father." He let one hand flop over at the wrist and minced forward, saying in a high, affected

voice, "Oh, my goodness gracious, I would so hate my dear old daddy to hear I've been hobnobbing with those dreadful dirty gypsy children. I might spoil my velvet coat!"

"Well, his father is very protective of him," Emilia said. "Remember how much trouble he got in that time we convinced him to come out one night and look for badgers?"

As they moved into the crowd, Emilia looked round for any sign of the watching soldier, but he had disappeared, and she felt herself relax. "We should be more careful," she said to Luka. "You know Baba says Cromwell has spies everywhere."

"It wasn't me flapping my tongue about," Luka said. He clasped his hands under his chin, flapped his eyelashes and said in a high, girlish voice, "Oh! It's fair day! You should be having some fun!"

Zizi shrieked with laughter and copied him, her wizened paws tucked under her chin, her head tilted girlishly to one side.

Emilia punched him.

"Ow! Do you have to hit so hard?"

"I can hit harder," Emilia threatened.

"Only if you catch me!" Luka cried, and broke into a run, weaving in and out of the barrows. Emilia raced after him, Alida cantering behind her. People looked after them, wondering if they should call a hue and cry, but the children's laughter reassured them and they went back to their work.

"Let's go get Beatrice and show her all the money we've raised!" Emilia cried. "She'll be so pleased."

Beatrice and Noah were still performing before the church, Rollo lying at their feet. In her green ruffled skirts, with a rose tucked behind her ear, Beatrice looked prettier than ever amongst the farmers' wives in their drab blacks. Noah was exciting a lot of attention too, a small blind boy playing the fiddle with such fierce skill. Emilia could see the cap at his feet was filled with coins.

Beatrice was singing a favourite song of hers:

"If I were a blackbird I would whistle and sing,
I would follow the vessel my true love sailed in
All on the top rigging I would build my nest
And I'd sleep the long night on his lily-white breast."

It was a lovely song with a lovely tune, and a large crowd had gathered to listen.

The two children joined the throng, then clapped loudly as the song finished. Beatrice smiled and glanced their way. Suddenly her expression changed. She shrank back, pale and frightened.

A shadow had fallen over the square, pointing like an accusing finger at Beatrice. Noah lowered his violin, wondering why she had stopped singing. Emilia turned to look, and felt her heart sink.

The pastor stood frowning in the square. He was tall and thin and very pale, and dressed all in black, except

for his collar and cuffs, which were white as frost. His tall steeple hat was set very straight on his head, and it was the shadow of this which had fallen upon Beatrice. Two deep lines were driven from the sides of his high-bridged nose to the corners of his narrow mouth. He looked at Beatrice and Noah with loathing. Behind him was the soldier with the bristly chin who had been staring at them in the square.

"Singing for coins, right before our blessed church!" The pastor's eyes blazed with righteousness. "Surely such brazen-faced sin must offend us all?"

"It's gypsies, sir," the soldier said in a harsh voice. "Filthy, thieving hedge-birds. Should be hanged, they should. Only cure for them."

"Indeed, Coldham, they are an ungodly people," the pastor said, and folded his long, pale hands. "And if you are right, dabbling in treason too. Very well. Let us have them to prison. I will not have gypsies singing and fiddling at the very door of my church. Seize them!"

"Criminy!" Luka exclaimed. "It's a crow-fair!"

"Quick!" Emilia cried. "Find your dado! We've got to get out of here!"

Luka nodded and went running back towards the inn. Coldham strode forward and gripped Beatrice and Noah firmly. Beatrice was weeping and trying to reach her brother, who was struggling as well as he could with a fiddle and bow clutched to his skinny chest. Rollo snarled and lunged at Coldham, who kicked him hard in the side, knocking him head over heels, yelping.

Noah turned his face from side to side anxiously. "Rollo?"

Coldham drew his knife.

"No!" Beatrice and Emilia screamed together. Emilia whistled urgently, and Beatrice cried, "Go, Rollo! Go to Milly!"

"Go!" Noah called, his voice high with fear. "Rollo, go!"

The big dog reluctantly obeyed, head down and tail sunk between his legs, turning to look back at Noah. Beatrice reached out and grabbed her brother, drawing him to her side, and he hid his sightless eyes against her skirt.

Just then Luka and Jacob came running towards them, Sweetheart loping behind. Silvia and Mimi hurried after them, looking scared.

"A whole tribe of the infidels!" the pastor exclaimed. "Arrest them all!"

Jacob pushed Sweetheart's chain into Luka's hand and came forward, both hands raised. "Come now, we're not doing any harm."

"Call the constables!" the pastor cried. "I will not have thieves and vagrants causing trouble in my town."

"Nay, no need for that," Jacob said. "We're just here for the fair, like all these other good people. We've done our business, we'll be on our way, no need for any bother."

The pastor looked at him in contempt. "Get the constables," he said to a bystander, who went running

away through the square, shouting. Within moments three constables were in the square, cudgels in their hands. Jacob began to look about him for some way out. "Get the girls out of here," he hissed at Luka.

Luka nodded and jerked his head at Emilia, who began to retreat, her hand tight on Alida's bridle. Mimi and Silvia began to back away too, looking for some way through the crowd. One of the constables seized Mimi by the wrist, dragging her back towards the pastor.

"Stop it, you're hurting me," Mimi wept.

"How dare you! She's naught but a babe!" Silvia cried. She swung her basket and hit the constable hard across the head. "Take that, you big bully!" she yelled. "And that!"

The constable let go of Mimi's wrist and raised his arm to protect his head, as Silvia rained blows upon him. She was a tall, strong woman, and her basket was laden with all she had bought or bartered for at the fair. The constable retreated, cursing, and Silvia charged after him, her basket swinging. Then he tripped and fell back over a stall of ironware. The whole thing came crashing down upon him, pots and pans and ladles and skillets raining everywhere. They banged and clattered, rolling away over the cobblestones, and at last lay silent around the ruin of the stall. All that could be seen of the constable were his big boots, sticking out from underneath. They did not move.

The ironmonger struggled to raise the heavy stall. At last he managed it, but still the constable did not move.

His head lolled sideways. A shrill scream rose high into the air. "He's dead, he's dead," the ironmonger's wife shrieked.

Silvia went white as whey and dropped her basket. She did not struggle or protest as the other constables seized her, but stared in horror at the dead man lying amidst all the iron cooking ware.

Emilia could not move. It was as if the world had suddenly been disconnected from her, spinning on without her. *That's the death*, she thought. *Baba heard right.*

One of the constables seized hold of Emilia. The hard grip snapped her back to reality. She kicked him in the stomach, dodged round a fat lady, ducked behind a thin man, and dived through the constable's legs, tripping him over. Coldham tried to grab her, but Beatrice hung on to his arm with both her hands, so that Emilia was able to slip through his fingers like a will-of-the-wisp. She leapt up on to Alida's bare back. The mare whinnied and reared, the constable staggered and fell over again, and then Emilia wheeled Alida about, her eyes flashing towards her sister and brother.

"Go! Go!" Beatrice cried frantically. "Get out of here!"

Glancing about, Emilia saw all her family had now been caught. Her Uncle Jacob had been seized, and Silvia huddled next to him, Mimi shrinking into her skirt. Luka was kicking and squirming in the grasp of one of the constables, while Sweetheart, frightened by his yells, rose up on to her haunches and snarled.

"Performing bears are against the law!" the pastor shouted. "Shoot the beast!"

"No!" Jacob struggled to get to his beloved old bear.

Luka jerked Sweetheart's chain so she reared up on to her hind legs. The constable, terrified, scrambled away. Luka turned and ran, Zizi shrieking and gibbering on his shoulder, Sweetheart lumbering beside him.

Emilia held down her hand for Luka, and he strained to reach her and Alida. But Coldham lashed out at him. Luka jerked away, letting go of the bear's chain. In an instant the constable was upon him, while Sweetheart – finding herself free – roamed over to a market stall that sold honey and helped herself. One of the constables raised his pistol and pointed it at her, but people were running, screaming, everywhere and he dared not shoot.

Noah stumbled forward, his violin clutched to his chest, trying to escape.

"Here, Noah, here!" Emilia screamed. He turned towards her, hand groping out in entreaty. She kicked Alida forward, thinking for one glad moment that she could reach him and swing him up behind her. Then the pastor stepped forward and grabbed Noah, dragging him back. Noah cried out in fear, and hit out with his violin. The pastor wrested the violin from him and flung it down on the cobblestones, stamping upon it until it was smashed to smithereens.

"You devil!" Emilia cried, wild with fury and grief as Noah sobbed in despair. "How could you!"

The pastor glanced up at her, his thin mouth twisted with dislike. He strode forward and seized Alida's halter. Emilia kicked him square in the chest with her bare foot. One of his boots slipped on the filthy cobbles and he lost his balance and fell back, straight into a huge, green, sloppy cowpat.

Emilia laughed. She could not help it. The pastor glared up at her and rose slowly to his feet, his face white and rigid. Emilia knew she had made an enemy. She wheeled Alida about, and brought the mare up on to her hind hooves so that the constable trying to grab her reins stumbled back.

"Go, Milly, go!" Luka shouted. "Get yourself out of here!"

"Take Sweetheart!" Jacob shouted.

"Please, Milly, go!" Beatrice cried.

Emilia gasped a sobbing breath, then whistled to the bear and the dog. Obediently Sweetheart and Rollo turned and followed as Emilia galloped out of the market square, knocking over a cage of chickens and a barrow of apples on the way.

Behind her she could hear the pastor screaming, "Catch her and bring her back! We'll see her burn in hell for this!"