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opening extract from

# The Talent Thief

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## Chapter One

# The Invitation




With the ring of a bell and a lazy sigh, the lift doors opened and Cressida Bloom, gathering in her evening dress, stormed out and swept across the landing. Her younger brother, Adam, followed her, his shiny shoes clacking on the polished wooden floor.

'Cress, what exactly did I do?' he said.

'I'm not talking to you,' she fumed as she pulled a key from her tiny handbag and opened the door to the apartment. She pushed her way in and let the door swing back into Adam's face.

Cressida was sixteen and pretty in an unusual way. She was of average height, slim and trying her best to progress from gangly to graceful. Her eyes were a remarkable pale green and framed by small, black spectacles. Her hair was dark and thick, and now she pushed it back from her

shoulders and pulled two teardrop-shaped earrings from her ears and let them clatter down on a glass-topped table. She ignored the ornate envelope that lay there unopened.

The apartment was spread over the entire top floor of the building like a luxurious yawn. Elegant furniture, grand paintings and bookshelves groaning with books were all perfectly placed and beautiful lamps glowed their approval in every room. Cressida wandered through to one of the living areas, flopped down into the warm embrace of a leather armchair and closed her eyes. Adam clattered in.

'Was it because I cheered?' he asked.

Adam Bloom was twelve and looked very uncomfortable in the dinner suit he was wearing. He fumbled to undo his bow tie and kicked his shiny shoes off so they skidded under a sofa. He had scruffy fair hair that grew in all directions like a pineapple top and he was almost as tall as his sister. His dark brown eyes seemed always to be asking questions. He was the kind of boy who stayed on rollercoasters and went round again. Adam annoyed Cressida endlessly.

'No, it wasn't because you cheered,' Cressida replied wearily.

'Was it because I yelled out that stuff about you being the best singer in the world?' Adam persisted.

'No,' Cressida answered, sinking further into her chair

and clamping her fists to cheeks glowing with embarrassment.

'Was it because I stood on my seat at the end and accidentally knocked that lady's hat off while I was waving at you?'

'No,' Cressida muttered.

'What was it then? Hmm?' Adam asked, blinking at his sister with confusion.

'All those things!' Cressida said. 'The cheering, the yelling, the standing on the chair! I'm singing in a concert at the Wireless Union Music Hall for the people of Riverfork City and you're goofing around like you're an exhibit at the zoo!' Cressida felt her cheeks grow hotter. 'The lady whose hat you knocked off was the wife of the mayor, for goodness sake!'

'Ah, she didn't mind,' Adam said.

'I minded!' Cressida said, her eyes white-hot and angry behind her spectacles.

'I was being supportive. I thought you'd like it,' Adam mumbled.

'I didn't! I hated it!' Cressida cried.

Adam fell silent and dropped on to a sofa. He gazed down gloomily at his socks. There was a pattern on them of jumping sheep. He suddenly felt silly. He hated it when his sister was mad at him. And it happened so often.

Cressida breathed in deeply and tried to calm herself.

She looked at Adam's sad face and felt the familiar feelings of guilt creep into her stomach. She pushed her spectacles back on to the bridge of her nose (they were always slipping down).

'I'm sorry. I'm not feeling so great about things at the moment,' she said. Just then Uncle Brody, a large, wheezing man of about sixty, waddled into the room puffing on a cigar. He had a round, salmon-pink face with podgy cheeks that made his beady eyes look even smaller than they were. His mouth was like two thin, wet strips of rubber. It was the kind of face that could never look kind or happy. He seemed surprised to see Cressida and Adam. He frowned.

'I thought you two were in bed,' he said, his fleshy jowls wobbling. He moved over to a cabinet and poured himself a large glass of brandy.

'We went to Cressida's concert, Uncle Brody,' Adam said.

'A "concert"?' Uncle Brody retorted, as though he had never heard the word before. He swigged his brandy and licked his toad-like lips.

'Yes, Uncle,' Cressida sighed, 'I sang in a concert tonight.'

'She was great! She *is* great. When she hits the high notes she can shatter glass,' Adam added, and Cressida shot a warning look in his direction.

Uncle Brody looked at Adam and Cressida's evening wear with a mixture of annoyance and bemusement.

'Why can't you just be like normal children? Hmm?' he asked. 'When I was forced to become your guardian I didn't think I'd have all this staying up till all hours and fancy-dressing. Children should—'

'I am sixteen years old!' Cressida blurted out.

'Don't you take that tone with me!' Uncle Brody cried. 'If your parents were here they'd be mortified!'

'Well, it's a good job they're not here then, isn't it?' Cressida blurted. She felt a wave of sadness and anger wash over her.

Uncle Brody glared at her, his tiny eyes shining and his wet lips quivering with fury.

'Get out of my sight!' he hissed.

'Gladly,' Cressida replied, and with that she flicked off her high-heeled shoes, walked out of the living area and padded down the hall.

She stepped out on to a wide balcony which boasted a heart-stopping view of the entire city. The cool night air felt soothing on Cressida's face. She took a deep breath and looked down at the thousands of twinkling lights below. Cars honked as they made their way in steady streams along the grid of roads that criss-crossed Riverfork City. In the big park to the west, people were taking horse-drawn carriage rides, and in the bay boats small

and large blared friendly high and low foghorn notes to avoid running into each other in the evening mist. So many people, yet Cressida felt very much alone. She started to cry.

'Uncle Brody's not happy with you,' Adam said quietly as he joined her.

'I don't care,' Cressida replied, stifling her sobs. 'He's a hideous creature only loosely disguised as a human being.'

'Sorry I showed you up . . . I think maybe I'm trying too hard to stand in for our parents.'

'You don't need to do that.'

'We're probably in shock,' Adam said. 'You know, since the incident. It's only been fourteen months, after all.'

Cressida said nothing at this. She took a gulp of evening air and tried to compose herself because she had something important to say.

'I'm not sure I want to carry on singing.'

For a moment, Adam looked stunned, teetering on his heels. Then he slapped his hand down hard on the wooden balcony railing. 'You must!' he shouted. 'You have a beautiful, rare talent!'

'Don't talk to me about talent. Look what it did to our parents,' Cressida said. Her voice cracked and she gave a little cough.

'The way they died wasn't to do with their talent. It was to do with thin ice,' Adam said.

'Yes, but they wouldn't have *been* on thin ice if they weren't trying to win their millionth stupid ice-skating contest,' Cressida said. 'They had everything. Why didn't they just stop?'

'Because they had to share their talent with the world. Because they *wanted* to. It would have been a waste not to,' Adam said.

'How come you're such an expert anyway, Adam?' Cressida asked, her eyes taking on a steely look. 'It's not as if you have any talent of your own now, is it?'

Adam bit his lip. His sister's words stung and he felt a lump rising in his throat which prevented him from speaking. He knew he did not have any talent of his own, unlike the rest of his immediate family. But that hadn't seemed to matter to him when his parents were alive. Sure, they had encouraged Cress's singing, but above all they had wanted him and Cress to be happy. They had always said he was special anyway – he and Cressida both were, in their own ways – even if Adam could never see exactly how himself. His eyes brimmed with tears.

Cressida felt the guilt churning in her stomach again but she fought the urge to apologize. Her parents were stupid to leave her and Adam the way they did and Adam was even more stupid for continuing to cheer them on.

'I'm going to bed,' Cressida said and she headed inside.

Adam nodded. He understood she was upset. He just wished he didn't always have to take the brunt of it.

Next morning, Cressida was sitting at a small table on the balcony, lost in thought, munching toast and watching the sunlight twinkle on the water in the bay. Adam came out and stretched and yawned with gusto. He grinned at his sister. Any bad feelings he had felt towards her the night before were gone. He did not hold grudges and, anyway, since his parents had died he had decided that it was his responsibility to keep himself and his 'artistic' sister on an even keel. It was what his parents would have wanted, he was sure. And she was his sister after all! Uncle Brody certainly could not care less.

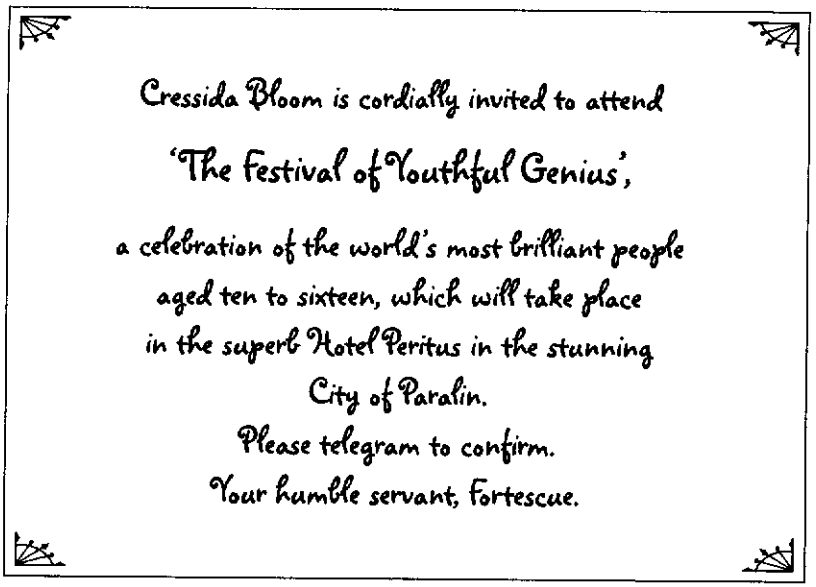
'Morning, Cress!' Adam said.

Cressida grunted in response. Adam sat down and grabbed a slice of toast from the rack and began to butter it with enthusiasm. Cressida tried to ignore the louder than necessary scraping noise. As Adam took a hearty bite he remembered something and reached into his trouser pocket. He dropped the ornate envelope which had been on the glass hall table in front of Cressida.

'Aren't you going to open it?' he asked. 'It's been sitting there for days now.'

'It'll be a tedious invite to sing at some dreary function,' Cressida muttered, pushing the envelope away.

Adam picked it up and tore it open. He pulled out a silver card with beautiful swirly writing on and read it aloud.




'Those people should write travel brochures,' Cressida said. '"Brilliant", "superb", "stunning". Give me a break.'

'You gonna go?' Adam asked, his eyes shining. 'It sounds great!'

'Didn't I say last night that I am giving up singing?' Cressida said.

Suddenly, cigar-stained fingers grabbed the card from

Adam's hand and Uncle Brody dropped down heavily into a chair and started to read it to himself, making disgusting little snuffling noises as he did so.

'What's this?' he mumbled. 'Why would anyone invite either of you to anything?' And with that he threw the card down on the table, where it landed in the butter.

'Because she's amazingly talented,' Adam answered.

'There's no such thing as "talent",' Uncle Brody said. 'There's only luck.'

'Your brother was talented,' Cressida said. She could feel herself getting irritable again. Uncle Brody always made her get like that.

'Your father had a lucky break,' Uncle Brody said. 'It should have been me with all that ice-skating glory.'

Adam cast his gaze over Uncle Brody's enormous bulk.

'You were an ice skater?' he asked, trying to keep the amazement out of his voice.

'Could have been,' Uncle Brody replied, 'if it weren't for my ankles. Your father had the good luck of having strong ankles. All there is to it.'

And with that Uncle Brody rummaged in his jacket pocket and pulled out a half-smoked cigar and a box of matches. He lit the cigar and started puffing, retreating into a little world of his own.

Cressida watched him and decided not to remind her uncle of his own extreme good 'luck' – how his brother's

gift had enabled the rich and very lazy lifestyle Uncle Brody enjoyed, without Uncle Brody having to lift a finger, or ankle, of his own.

'Talent does exist and my sister has it,' Adam suddenly declared. 'And she needs support to make it grow.'

'Shh, Adam,' Cressida said. She did not want support. She did not want to make her 'talent' grow. She just wanted a safe, quiet, happy life.

'You two talk too much,' Uncle Brody said, his face now hidden by a cloud of smoke. 'I want some changes around here. I want you in your rooms a lot more often. I certainly don't want to see or hear you after eight o'clock in the evening and there'll be no more, you know, frivolity with dressing up and going out. I don't want young, noisy lives disrupting mine.'

Cressida felt her spirits sink further. Living with Uncle Brody was already bad enough, even though she spent a lot of time out of the apartment at various events. Without those chinks of freedom she could see herself becoming truly miserable in a very short period of time. She plucked the card from the butter and, with a huge effort, she smiled at Uncle Brody.

'Uncle, do you think I may go to this?' she asked. 'I'd be out of your way. Maybe for a long time and . . .'

Adam looked at his sister with rising panic. She might not want to sing but she certainly wanted to get away

from their uncle, maybe forever, and Adam did not relish the idea of being left alone with him.

'And, and you'll have the apartment all to yourself,' Adam stuttered, 'and you can wander around smoking cigars and drinking brandy all day and all night in peace. Please let us go.'

Cressida frowned at Adam, but he just shrugged and grinned. She decided to say nothing. Adam was not her favourite person in the world at the moment. Even so, she could not sentence him to life alone with Uncle Brody.

Their uncle mulled the request over.

'Yep, you can go. But take the trash out first,' he said.

# INTRODUCTORY NOTE TO 'PROJECT GOLDEN HARVEST' NOTEBOOK

MYTHS AND LEGENDS DO NOT JUST APPEAR OUT OF THIN AIR. THERE IS ALWAYS SOME SPARK OF TRUTH WHICH STARTS THEM OFF. OF COURSE, THE YEARS MIGHT EXPAND THE TRUTH LIKE THE SNOWBALL GAINING IN SIZE AS IT ROLLS DOWN THE MOUNTAIN, BUT WHAT IF THAT INITIAL SPARK WERE ENOUGH TO IGNITE A DREAM? MY DREAM. I HAVE SPENT MANY YEARS NOW IN LIBRARIES AND MUSEUMS TRANSLATING ANCIENT PARCHMENTS AND READING REPORTS FROM EXPLORERS AND LOCALS. THIS MYSTERIOUS, WONDERFUL, SHADOWY ENTITY MUST EXIST. AND I SHALL FIND IT, ESCAPE THIS ORDINARY LIFE AND MAKE MY DREAM A REALITY - WHATEVER THE COST.