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Opening extract from
Rowan the Strange

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THE VAN WITH THE BLUE CROSS

On the day war broke out Rowan's grandmother turned up outside his house, in a white van with a blue cross on it, and told him to get in.

'I can't,' Rowan pleaded, shrinking lower on the doorstep where he'd been sitting as still as a boot-scraper, watching the sky. 'What if those sirens go off again? What if Spitalfields gets bombed? I need to be here.'

'Rowan,' his grandmother replied, 'if Spitalfields gets bombed—which it won't, trust me—you're best off being somewhere else, aren't you? Come on. I need you.'

Inside the house, Sunday dinner was cooking and Rowan's little sister was playing the piano. The smell of Bisto . . . the sound of the 'Moonlight Sonata' spilling from an open window . . . so very normal, Rowan thought; so very *safe*, even though his mother was probably cursing the gravy for going all lumpy in the pan and ten-year-old Laurel was hitting so many wrong notes that the sonata made you wince.

Only . . . there was something else; some small, niggling

thing that, on any other day, might have seemed to him as bearable as the lumpy gravy and his sister's poor playing, but which right now . . .

Rowan shifted on the step. His grandmother was getting impatient, pressing her right foot up and down so that the van sounded impatient too, and raring to go. If he went with her now—immediately, without thinking twice—the Small Niggling Thing might disappear. Then again, it might actually get worse, looming larger and larger, like an escaping genie, the further they got from the house until . . .

'Nana,' Rowan said, in growing alarm, 'was Beethoven German or Dutch?'

'German,' his grandmother replied, raising her voice above the thrumming of the van. 'I believe. Now, are you coming with me or not?'

Rowan stood up. His heart was pounding, out of rhythm, and the sweat was forming, as it always did at moments like these, in a wet band around his hairline and two slicks under his arms.

'Rowan?'

'Just minute, Nana. I have to . . . I need . . . '

'Oh, Ro . . . there isn't *time*. Just shout down to your mother that you're coming with me and that it's important. Where are . . . ? Oh, for goodness' sake, pet . . . ' She switched off the engine and got out of the van. 'Well, *I'll* tell her then. Just hurry up my darling. Don't take all day.'

She thinks—hopes—I need the bathroom . . . Rowan tore into the house, his heart bumping harder as he passed gas masks hanging, like ugly bonnets, from pegs in the hall. And in his agitation, as the 'Moonlight Sonata' limped

and thumped towards its third movement, he *was* tempted to head straight on, to the sanctuary of white tiles, running water, and a locked door. But what Laurel was doing was too distressing, too dangerous, to be ignored. Nor could it be drowned out, or made safe, by the flushing of a lavatory or the turning on of a tap.

She had to stop. He had to stop her. Immediately. Right now.

The drawing room door was shut. A barricade. A bad omen. For a moment or two—long enough for his grandmother to come in and go grumbling down to the kitchen—Rowan simply stood and sweated. Then he kicked open the door.

'Go away, Ro.' His sister's voice was pure and firm above a clash of chords. 'I'm practising.'

The September sunshine was on her like a spotlight. She looked sweet, sitting there on the antique piano stool, her head bent in concentration, the sun gilding her hair. But Rowan saw no sweetness. To him the sun was a searchlight and his sister's bright red hair looked to be on fire. To him it was all danger, danger, danger.

'Stop playing that,' he ordered. '*Stop it, Laurel.*'

His sister shrugged and carried on. *A-flat major*, she thought, grinning at the image that popped into her head of a stout military man squashed flat by a tank. This final movement of the 'Moonlight Sonata' was a stormy thing, full of sadness and rage. Beethoven had been known to break hammers and strings playing it.

'Go *away*, Ro,' she said again, without turning round, and the notes she struck were the harshest yet.

Rowan stood his ground. His head had a whirlpool in

it. His heart felt as if it was trying to burst, like a rat, through the bones of his chest. 'I said STOP IT!' he yelled, loud enough to sear his throat.

Grimly Laurel played on, pounding the keys with all her might. She didn't care any more about keeping time but was doing her best to follow the melody because she sensed it was the tune itself, rather than her playing of it, that was driving her brother nuts. And she wanted to get the better of him. To teach him a lesson. Because he was Ro-the-Strange, a brother to be ashamed of, and because right now, with the country gone to war, she could do without his craziness making everything worse.

'Children—PLEASE!'

Dimly Rowan heard a clang of pans, like tin heads being banged together, as his mother called angrily for peace. In a minute his father would come hurrying down from his studio, not furious or shouting but distracted, obviously, and disappointed, too, which for some reason Rowan always found harder to bear from him than any great loss of temper.

Imagining, already, the look on his father's face, Rowan made a big effort to hold himself together. To not mind so horribly much that German music was filling his ears, the hall, and the street. To stop believing that the longer it went on the more likely it was that the first of Hitler's bombs to fall over England would land smack-bang on this house.

It's all right, he tried telling himself. *This is just our Lol practising some music, like she always does on Sundays, before we have our roast. It doesn't mean anything. Nothing bad is going to happen.*

But it was no good. As always, the bit of him that was panic-stricken was too far gone to be reasoned with. Like a dark twin, or a Russian doll—himself, but not—that part had its own logic; its own way of seeing things. And right now, with the 'Moonlight Sonata' playing on and on and on, it was terrified. It was seeing rubble. It was seeing arms and legs poking gorily from the ruins; a piano bombed to splinters. It was chanting '*stop the bitch*,' over and over and, as usual, it was loud.

Nothing bad . . . *nothing* . . . . But his mind was a sieve . . . a net . . . a strainer of thoughts, with reason, like water, rushing straight through all the holes.

'For*tissimo*!' young Laurel called out boldly, just to show him who was winning this particular battle of wills. 'Ar*peggios*.'

Rowan didn't understand. It was just more noise, and foreign noise at that, upsetting the balance of things further still. Lurching forward, like someone pushed, he set off across the room. His sister, intent on finishing the third movement, determined not to stop until the very last note had sounded, and died away, neither heard nor sensed him coming until he was right there behind her, his breath hot on her neck.

'*Get*—' was all she had time to say before the piano lid slammed down, breaking three of her fingers, like twigs.

'I didn't mean to do it, Nana. I don't know what came over me.'

They—Rowan and his nana—were hurtling towards the West End in the van with the blue cross on it.

Hurtling along, and swerving round corners, like bank robbers evading the law.

'Rowan,' his grandmother said to him, 'there are no excuses. Not this time. These wild outbursts, they've got to stop, pet. If you were a dog they'd've had you put down back there. Immediately. No reprieve. "We thought the world of him," they would have said. "But he was too unpredictable; too dangerous to have around."'

Appalled, Rowan hung his head.

'I don't mean to be harsh, my darling.' The van shot, heedlessly, over a junction, 'But you can't carry on like this.'

'I can't help it,' Rowan said. 'It just happens. I get a thought and it . . . it *grows*. I try and stop it, Nana, but I never can.'

'How?' his grandmother asked him. 'How do you try and stop it, Rowan?'

Rowan thought hard, biting his lower lip as he struggled to remember. It was too difficult, though, like trying to recall what it had been like to be a baby. All he knew was that sometimes, right out of the blue, his mind had a mind of its own.

'Well, whatever you're doing,' his grandmother said, eventually, 'it's not working is it, pet? It's having no effect whatsoever. You might as well be whistling in the wind for all the effect it's having.'

Whistling in the wind. Rowan allowed himself to be entertained by the idea of that. The next time it blew a gale, he decided, he would step outside and whistle a tune, just to see how much of himself he could hear.

'Is Laurel going to be all right?' he asked, humbly. 'Will she still be able to play the piano?'

'I can't tell you,' his grandmother replied. 'We'll know more, I imagine, when she and your father get back from the hospital. Now . . . I know you're sorry, so let's let the matter drop, shall we, and concentrate on where we're going? All right?'

'All right.'

His nana, Rowan knew, was on a mission. A life or death mission. Only, thanks to him, she was running late and driving ten times worse than usual (which up until now he hadn't actually thought possible). In the great scheme of things, this, far more than the earlier business, was what ought to be scaring him witless: being zoomed across London by a wild-haired eighty-three year old who couldn't tell a stop sign from a lollipop and kept bouncing off the kerbs.

Surprisingly, though, Rowan felt perfectly safe being jounced around in the van. He trusted his nana behind the wheel, despite her great age and complete disregard for the highway laws. He admired her nerve. And anyway, the van had a blue cross on it, which meant that other people were supposed to get out of their way sharpish, like for a fire engine or a parade.

They were approaching Hyde Park Corner—always a tricky moment.

'Look!' Rowan's grandmother said, suddenly. 'Up there in the sky! Our boys haven't wasted any time, have they? They look like elephants, don't you think?'

Rowan looked, and marvelled, at the sight of barrage balloons drifting at the ends of steel cables, high over Buckingham Palace and its surrounding parks. They *did* look a bit like elephants, all baggy and grey in the sunshine and jostling, idly, for space.

'What . . . ?' he began.

'To stop the enemy coming in for a low level attack,' his grandmother explained. 'Although, if you ask, me . . . Oh, *heck*.'

A policeman was blowing his whistle, and waving wildly at their van.

'I think he wants you to pull over,' Rowan said. 'Safely,' he added, as his grandmother braked so sharply that the tyres squealed and the van slewed, like a dodgem, before coming to a halt.

The policeman's face looked heated as he hurried towards them, one hand raised to stop other cars from hitting him, the other resting purposefully on his right hip, as if he might suddenly pull a gun.

'Uh-oh,' said Rowan. 'I think we're in trouble.'

'Nonsense, pet.' His grandmother cranked down her window and stuck her head out. 'Afternoon, officer,' she called out. 'I trust this won't take long. I'm on a life or death mission, and every second counts.'

Police Constable Eddie Dobbs was young, although he looked completely grown-up to Rowan and formidable too in his uniform. He was young and he was tetchy: uncomfortably aware that being on traffic duty, today of all days, was no great shakes and would certainly win him no medals. He had been wondering, for a while, whether he might leave the police force, if things got really nasty, to fight for King and Country. But now that the war had officially started he knew that he would not. He was too big a scaredy-cat.

For several hours, as traffic flowed smoothly all around him, he had been feeling useless. A coward. A shirker of

his patriotic duty. And now here was this civilian, and an old boot of a woman at that, as good as telling him to get out of her way.

'And what "life or death" mission would this be then, madam?' he snapped, bending his knees the better to glare into the van.

'The kind in which a life hangs in the balance,' Rowan's grandmother replied, sweetly. 'And it would help, *tremendously*, officer, if you would give me specific directions to the German ambassador's residence in Carlton Terrace.'

'Would it now,' said PC Dobbs. 'Would it really.'

Rowan, sitting quietly, understood straightaway that his grandmother was making no friends here and might even be getting herself into very hot water indeed.

'Tell him, Nana,' he said. 'About the dog.'

PC Dobbs adjusted his gaze, his eyes sliding over and then away from the pale-faced, dark-haired boy in the passenger seat. 'The dog,' he repeated. 'Yes, do tell me about the dog. No—on second thoughts, don't.'

Behind him, someone hooted. *You're in the way, idiot,* said the hoot. PC Dobbs pressed so close to the side of the van as a car sped by, that he hurt himself.

'You've no business, either of you,' he snapped, 'going anywhere near any German ambassador's residence. It'll be cordoned off like as not. Out of bounds, anyway. In fact, you're to turn right round and go straight back home. Only first . . . ' He held up his traffic-stopping hand as Rowan's grandmother opened her mouth to protest. 'Only *first*, I'm going to search every inch of this van. Yes . . . I can assure you, madam, I am perfectly within my rights.

We're at war against Hitler, in case you hadn't noticed, so any vehicle caught tearing across London, in a mighty strange hurry, like, to reach the German ambassador is going to get searched. Thoroughly. With a very fine-tooth comb.'

'But . . . ' Rowan began, 'you don't . . . ' Someone—he—needed to tell this policeman that the German ambassador was no longer at home in Carlton Terrace. That he had fled the country days ago, taking everything he owned except his poor little dog who, right now, would be cowering in the darkest place it could find, waiting to be rescued.

Someone—he—ought also to point out that Nana was a lot more ancient than she looked and should be treated gently, like valuable china.

His grandmother, however, placed a hushing hand on his knee. 'It's all right, pet,' she whispered into his hair. 'Leave this to me.'

'But . . . ' If they were forced to turn back, what would become of that helpless little dog? It might die of thirst, or fright. Or someone else—someone cruel—might get to it first.

Rowan took a deep breath, then another. Amazingly . . . incredibly . . . he continued to feel safe. No voice in his head. No niggles. His grandmother had clambered out on to the road. She would deal with this, Rowan told himself. She would explain everything properly, and then they would be on their way.

'Are you the owner of this vehicle, madam?'

The policeman's voice was deeply sarcastic, as if he couldn't imagine Rowan's grandmother owning anything

much apart from her clothes, a few bits of jewellery, and her Very Unfortunate Attitude.

'The blue cross!' Rowan cried out. 'Haven't you noticed the blue cross? Don't you know what it means—sir?'

'Pipe down, sonny,' the policeman ordered. 'Just pipe down, sit still, and don't try anything funny.'

Chastened, Rowan turned to look out through the windscreen. His stomach gurgled and he thought, wistfully, about dinner. It would be late, now, and probably not very nice. Would Laurel be able to hold her knife and fork? *I didn't mean it*, he communed, silently, with the sky above Hyde Park. *I didn't mean to hurt my sister.*

The barrage balloons had altered their position. No longer sideways-on they looked menacing now, to Rowan: enemy aliens with enormous behinds. *Don't try anything funny*, he warned them in his head. *I'm watching you and I'm warning you: I have secret powers. Zap! Ker-Pow! Boom! I am Superboy from Planet Krypton and I am here to protect humankind.* When he heard a loud scraping noise, on the outside of the van, he fondly imagined one of the huge balloons flicking its chain at them, warning them off.

Then: 'I can assure you, officer, that won't rub out,' his grandmother said. 'It is a genuine blue cross, and I am a genuine volunteer rescue worker for Our Dumb Friends' League. And if my grandson and I don't make it across the city, to the German ambassador's . . . '

'Unlock the back of the vehicle, please.'

'If we don't get there soon a poor little dog is going to die. An innocent creature whose—'

'I *said* unlock these doors.'

Rowan winced. This policeman clearly didn't give a ha'penny chew about the German ambassador's dog. Either that or he didn't believe in it. Perhaps he reckoned Rowan and his grandmother were up to no good. Maybe . . . just maybe . . . thought they might be spies.

'And when I've searched inside,' PC Dobbs was saying, 'I want the bonnet lifted. Then I'm going underneath. With a flashlight.'

We're going to be stuck here all day, Rowan realized. *Even when he doesn't find anything he's going to keep us here for ages, just to be mean.*

'Very well,' he heard his grandmother say, followed by the chink-clunk of her keys as she unlocked the back of the van. Nobody in the world carried as many keys as Rowan's grandmother. She wore them like a medieval weapon, on a chain attached to her belt, and sometimes, if she'd been asleep a long time in her chair, they weighed her down as she tried to get up and her friend Rosa said: 'Honestly, Ivy, if you ever fall into the Thames it'll be curtains for you.'

The back of the van had a lot of dog paraphernalia in it: muzzles and grabbers and old blankets so hairy they looked a lot like creatures themselves. Most of the space, from floor to roof, was taken up by a wire cage, with newspapers laid down to sop up inevitable accidents. The back of the van was smelly. It shrieked 'dog' at you the second the doors swung open. Only a fool, Rowan reassured himself, would suspect the driver of being anything but a collector of stray animals. A bit dotty, perhaps, but certainly no threat to national security.

'What's in that box?' PC Dobbs snapped. 'There, in that corner?'

'Biscuits,' Rowan's grandmother told him. 'Shaped like little bones.'

'And that pile of old rope—what's that for?'

'Those are muzzle-leads of varying sizes. Small for daschunds, medium for springers, and large for Great Danes and Alsatians.'

'German dogs,' said PC Dobbs. 'Some of those mutts are Jerry breeds, aren't they?' He sounded both disgusted and triumphant.

Rowan's grandmother kept her voice very calm: 'Your point being?' she said.

PC Dobbs didn't rightly know what his point was. All he knew was he had stopped these people, he didn't like these people, and there was no way he was going to let them drive off on their life or death mission, whatever it was, while he himself went back to the lowly task of directing traffic round Hyde Park Corner.

'Step aside,' he ordered Rowan's grandmother. 'I'm going in.'

Spies, thought Rowan, wildly. *He definitely, seriously, honestly believes we are spies, on our way to the German ambassador with top secret information about the war. Maybe he reckons the dog biscuits have codes baked into them, or that the blankets are for hiding under, or that . . .*

When the van doors slammed, and the lock clicked back into place, he assumed the policeman had either been quick-smart about searching the cage, or had taken one good whiff of the hairy blankets and changed his mind. Then the shouting started, and the banging, and by

the time his grandmother eased herself back into the driving seat, her eyes bright and her keys jangling, he was in no doubt at all about what she had just done.

'Nana . . . ' he began, as the van's engine roared, the tyres screeched, and they re-joined the traffic on Hyde Park Corner.

'Not a word!' she interrupted, cheerfully. 'We're on a life or death mission, remember, and every second counts.'

'But . . . '

'I know, I know . . . just try to ignore him, pet. It's not for very long, he can't come to any harm, and as soon as we get to Carlton Terrace we'll let him out. All right?'

In the back of the van, PC Dobbs was threatening all sorts. Court. Fines. Prison. The Full Weight of the Law.

'Let's hope his bark is worse than his bite,' said Rowan's grandmother and, in spite of everything, Rowan chuckled.