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Opening extract from

The Luck Uglies

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Published by

HarperCollins Children's Books

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First published in hardback in Great Britain by HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2014
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins *Publishers* Ltd,
77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London, W6 8JB.

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1

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978-0-00-752690-1
Printed and bound in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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A WORD ABOUT VILLAINS…

Mum said the fiends usually came after midnight. They'd flutter down silently from rooftops and slither unseen from the sewers under a Black Moon. Luck Uglies, she'd call them, then quickly look over her shoulder to make sure they weren't listening. Father said the Luck Uglies weren't monsters. Outlaws, criminals, villains, certainly, but they were men, just like us.

I still remember the night the Earl's army marched through the village, forcing them north into the toothy shadows of the forest. Soldiers were sent to follow, but none ever returned. With time, the Luck Uglies faded into ghosts, then whispers. And finally, after many years, it was as if they had never existed at all.

Anonymous Villager



THE GARGOYLE

Rye and her two friends had never intended to steal the banned book from The Angry Poet – they'd just hoped to read it. In truth, it was nothing more than curiosity that had brought them to the strange little bookshop wedged between a grog shop and the coffin maker. But the shop's owner overreacted so strongly that they fled without thinking, the illicit tome still clutched under Rye's arm.

The accidental thieves tore back out on to Market Street, bouncing off villagers who shared the winding, cobblestone road with horse-drawn carts and pigs foraging in the sewers for scraps. The street was narrow and congested at the noon hour, its alleys clogged with foot traffic blocking their escape. The poet himself, hefty

and determined, ploughed through everything in his path. With a quick nod as their unspoken signal, the children changed course. Their escape turned vertical as they scattered in different directions, each searching for footholds in the jagged bricks and mortar of the Market Street shops.

Rye had never been comfortable on the rooftops. They had scaled them once or twice before, but only as an avenue of last resort. She scrambled up the steeply pitched timbers, darting between the twisted chimneys, scowling gargoyles and leaking gutters of Village Drowning. Black smoke billowed up from the shops and markets, fogging her cloak with the smell of cured meat and birch bark. She didn't pause to look back at her pursuer – she'd been chased enough times to know better than that. Clearing the ridge of a gable, her momentum plunged her down the other side, legs churning uncontrollably to keep up. She stopped hard at the edge of the thatch and shingle roof, peering down past the toes of her oversized boots to the unforgiving cobblestones far below.

In front of her was freedom. Quinn Quartermast had already made it across a narrow alleyway on to the

neighbouring roof. He was all arms and legs, built perfectly for jumping.

Somewhere not far behind Rye was a poet with bad intentions, one who had proved to be a remarkably agile climber for someone of such large proportions.

"I don't think I can do it, Quinn," Rye said.

"Of course you can," Quinn yelled and waved her on.

"No, really. I'm not very good at this sort of thing."

Rye looked out at the village around her. Drowning was more of a sprawling town than a village, one built on a foundation of secrets, rules and lies, but mostly just mud. It straddled the edge of the brackish River Drowning, close enough to the sea for residents to smell the tide in the mornings and watch the brash gulls waddle into the butcher shop and fly off with a tail or a hoof. North of the river and the town's walls were creeping bogs blanketed in salt mist, and beyond that was the vast, endless pine forest rumoured to harbour wolves, bandits and clouds of ugly luck. Villagers referred to it only as Beyond the Shale. Nobody respectable believed it to be full of enchanted beasts any more, but old rumours died hard, and there was still a general notion that the great forest teemed with both

malice and riches for those brave or foolhardy enough to go looking.

Footsteps pounded the roof behind Rye. They belonged not to the angry poet, but to a small, cloaked and hooded figure that stormed right past her, arms pumping. It leaped into the air and landed with a thud and a barrel roll on the opposite roof next to Quinn. The figure popped to its feet and pulled off its hood to reveal a crazy nest of hair so blonde it was almost white. Her big blue eyes shone like marbles.

"He's right behind me," Folly Flood said between gasps.

"Just run and jump," Quinn said to Rye. "It's really not far."

"You've jumped that distance a hundred times on the ground," Folly added.

"Yes, but this is different," Rye explained, looking down again. "Something will happen. It always does."

"You can make it. Come on," Quinn said.

"I've been told that I'm a little bit clumsy."

"Nonsense," Quinn said, without conviction.

"Absurd," Folly scoffed unconvincingly. "Now jump."

"He's a poet," Rye said. "How bad could it be?"

"He's angry," said Quinn.

"And big as a humpback," Folly added.

As if waiting for just such an introduction, the poet in question pulled his ample belly on to the far side of the roof. He was indeed angry – for a variety of reasons, Rye supposed. For one, nobody paid much attention to poets any more. Most villagers wanted to hear words sung over harps or stomped out by actors in tights and feathered caps. Plus, as far as Rye could tell, books weren't exactly flying off the shelves in Drowning, its residents more partial to fishing, fighting and fortune hunting. In fact, the Earl who oversaw the affairs of Drowning had not only banned women and girls from reading, but went so far as to outlaw certain books altogether. None was more illicit than the book Rye now pressed close to her body, *Tam's Tome of Drowning Mouth Fibs, Volume II* – an obscure history textbook that had been widely ignored until the Earl described it as a vile collection of scandalous accusations, dangerous untruths and outright lies. Even an eleven-year-old could work out that meant there must be some serious truth to it.

The Earl's soldiers had collected and destroyed every copy they could find. Rye had heard rumblings that the

poet kept a copy of *Tam's Tome* in a secret back room. On certain nights he would hold private readings for rebellious nobles with inquisitive minds. Rye and her friends had no silver shims to buy their way in, so they had held their own secret reading in the shop's broom cupboard. Unfortunately, the poet had picked an inopportune time to sweep the floor.

The poet seemed none too pleased that they'd now made off with *Tam's Tome*, accidentally or not.

"Come on, Rye," Quinn and Folly yelled together. "Now!"

Rye took a deep breath. "Here goes."

She took five steps back to prepare for her run. She adjusted her leggings. She puffed her cheeks, clapped her hands together and then made a critical mistake.

She glanced over her shoulder.

The poet had cleared the ridge behind her. The roof shook with his heavy footfall as he steamed towards her, and Rye narrowly escaped his lurching grasp as his momentum carried him right past her. Rye froze wide-eyed as the enormous man hurtled to the edge of the roof, flailed to regain his balance, teetered on his toes and somehow managed to avoid plunging off the side. He glared accusingly at Rye.

Rye turned and darted over the next gable to the village's tallest bell tower. Its rusted whale weathervane loomed over her as she crouched among the stone gargoyles and grotesques under the tower's shadowed eaves.

Quinn's and Folly's urgent calls were muffled by the throbbing pulse in her ears. The gargoyles stared with gaping mouths as they waited for her next move. A rook perched on the shoulder of one gargoyle, grooming its inky-black feathers with a sharp grey beak. This was no place to hide for long.

Rye could hear the wheeze of the poet's gasps as he made his way towards her. She knew she had to move. She wiped her damp hands on her leggings, but her muscles refused to budge.

The solitary rook cocked its head at her and made a clicking sound with its beak. Rye twisted her face into a scowl and shook a fist, hoping to threaten it into silence. Drowning was overrun with the ugly black birds. The locals had taken to calling them roof rodents.

That was when she noticed that the bird's perch was not like the other gargoyles. If this gargoyle had wings, they fell over its shoulders like the folds of a cloak. Its angular black