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JENNY PEARSON

'An absolute cracker!'
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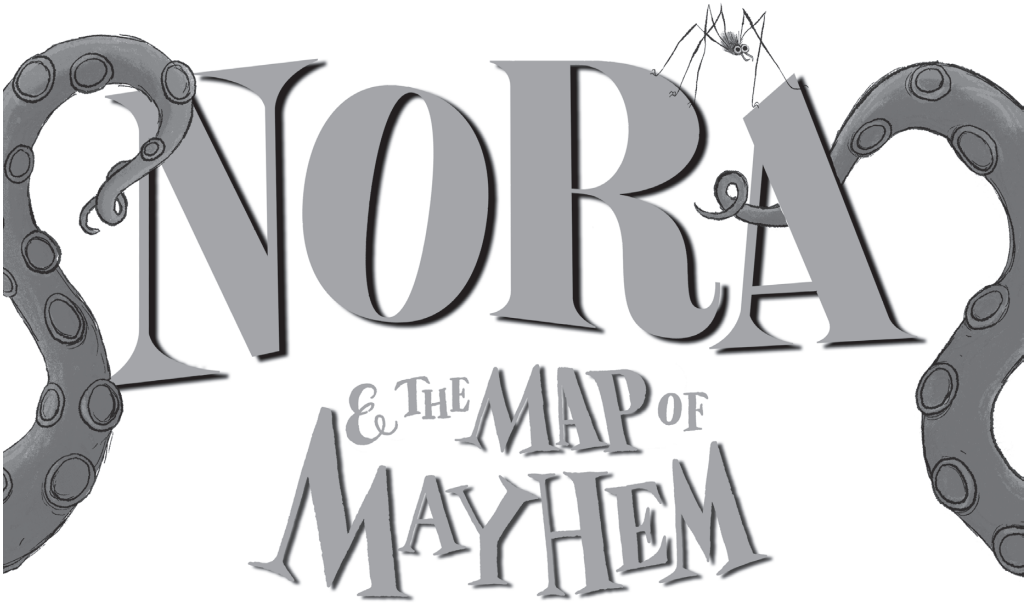

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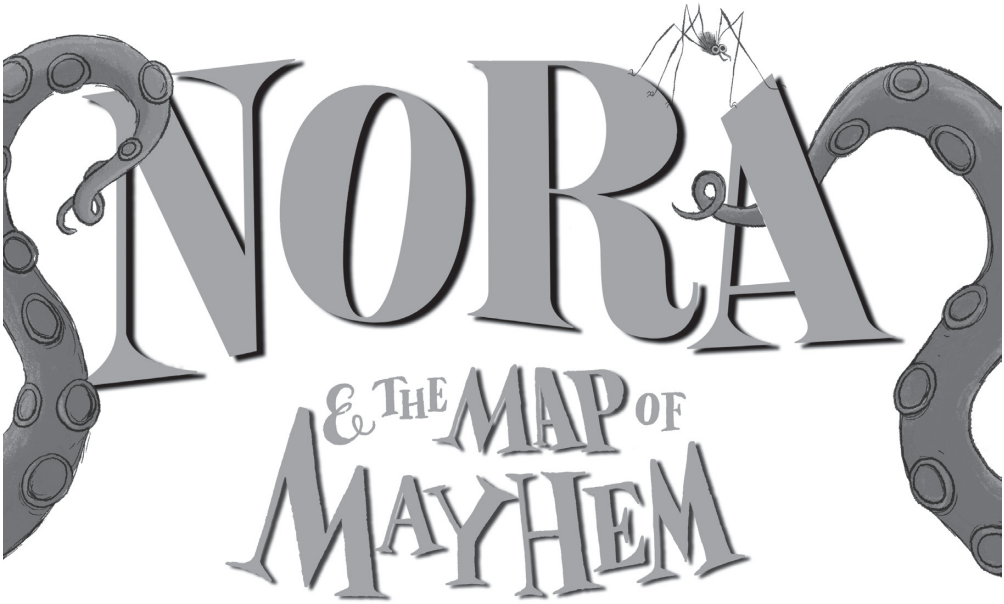

NORA & THE MAP OF MAYHEM

illustrated by
Nici GREGORY

Piccadilly PRESS

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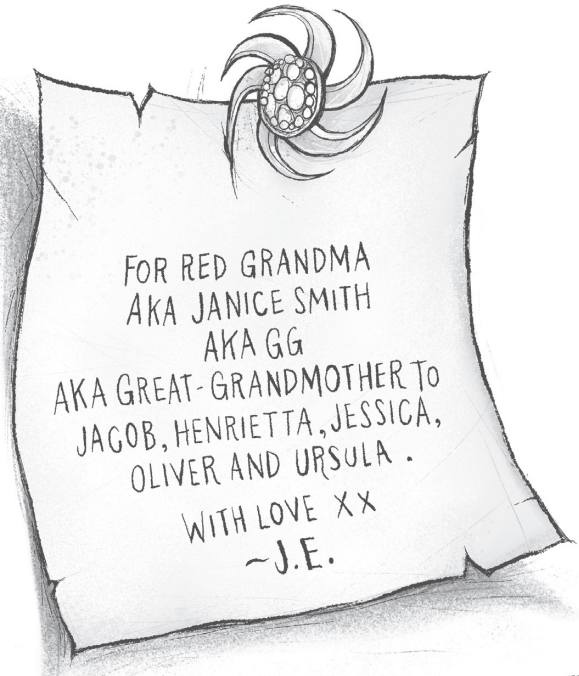
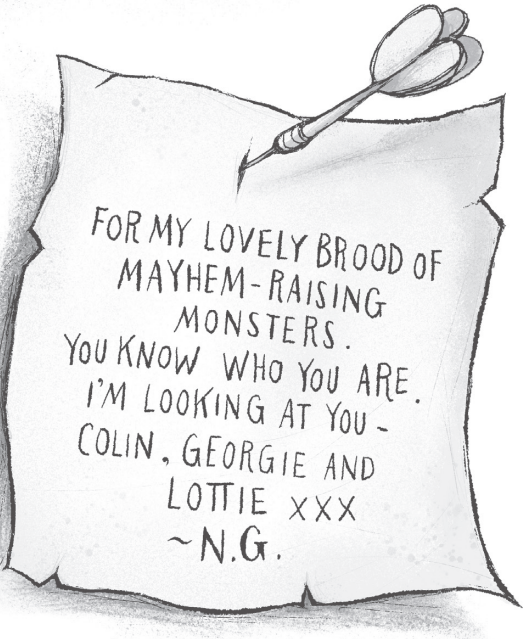

FOR RED GRANDMA
AKA JANICE SMITH
AKA GG
AKA GREAT-GRANDMOTHER TO
JACOB, HENRIETTA, JESSICA,
OLIVER AND URSULA.
WITH LOVE XX
~J.E.


FOR MY LOVELY BROOD OF
MAYHEM-RAISING
MONSTERS.
YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE.
I'M LOOKING AT YOU -
COLIN, GEORGIE AND
LOTTIE XXX
~N.G.

Oi. What do you think you're doing?

Yes, I'm talking to you.

Did I say you could read this book? No, I most certainly did not. So get your grubby little nose out of other people's business and stop reading RIGHT NOW.

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Um, why did you turn the page?? I thought I told you to get lost?!

Well, if you're going to stick around, I suppose I'd better tell you a bit about myself. I'm not entirely without manners, you know, unlike *some* people I know (you).

My name is Nora. I live in that cottage up on the hill. You've probably passed it and admired my geraniums. If you haven't, you should have done, because they're stunning.

As you can see, I'm very lovable and incredibly charming. What else do you want to know?

What's that? You want to know how old I am?!

You can't hear me, but I. Am. Gasping.

You shouldn't be asking such RUDE questions, so I have no intention of answering. What I will say is this: I may be old, but I'm not one of those cutesy-wutesy, scarf-knitting old biddies you see on the television. Oh no. If

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you could see me now, you'd probably say something like, 'Wow, you're so cool. I love your hair. Where did you get your leather jacket from? Isn't it a little early in the day to be drinking piña coladas?' etc.

Yeah, I'm *that* old person.

And now that you know a little bit about me (and I have no interest in you whatsoever) I suggest we never speak to each other again. So, close the book now and we can both be on our way.

The end.

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You have got to be kidding me . . .

WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE?!

I was getting ready to crimp my hair and head to the casino.

Okay, fine. FINE. You win this round, snotface. If you won't stop reading, I suppose I'm going to have to keep talking. (Don't think about the logic of that too hard, or it will make your brain explode.)

Here's the deal: I'm going to tell you a story, but it's going to be all about ME. The first thing you need to know about this story is that it is absolutely 100%, cross-my-heart-and-hope-not-to-fart, completely and utterly true. There

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are some parts in the middle where you're going to be like 'Yeah, yeah, nice one, Nora, there's no way that really happened', but I promise you IT DID. I may be many things, but a liar I am not.

Not sure why that came out sounding like Yoda. A Jedi also I am not.

This story starts with a girl, a boy, and a glamorous older lady who very foolishly agreed to look after them (me).

I'm sure you're wondering how I – an intelligent and independent woman – ended up looking after two little weasels. Well, they're my grandchildren, so I didn't have much choice. Technically, they are my *great*-grandchildren, but admitting that makes me a *great*-grandmother, which makes me sound **terrifyingly** old, so let's not go there.

The children are the property of my grandson, Liam. He's a *very* talented young artist, and he had to go to Stockholm to discuss an exhibition

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at some fancy-pants gallery. I can never say no to him, so when he asked me if I'd look after Atticus and Autumn for a couple of days, of course I said yes – a decision I would come to regret. Many times.

'What are you doing here?!' I asked, on the morning Liam and Niko came around to drop them off.

I've gone back in time now to when the story starts. Keep up.

'You agreed to look after the kids, remember?' said Liam.

Of course I remembered, but I thought if I pretended I'd forgotten, I might get them to change their minds.

'But Mavis has got a new hot tub and she's invited me over for bubbles and bagels,' I complained.

There was an awkward moment during which no one spoke. Liam gave Niko a pained look.

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'Okay, okay, come in,' I eventually said.

They all bundled into my skinny hallway.

'*Efharistó*, Yaya Nora, thank you,' said Niko, giving me a kiss on both cheeks. Niko is Liam's husband. He's 50% Greek, 50% Iranian and 100% gorgeous.

'Don't forget, Atticus doesn't like sweetcorn, Autumn is allergic to horses, and we have a strict "no screens after 7 p.m." policy,' said Liam, placing two large suitcases at the bottom of the stairs.

'Yes, yes, yes,' I replied, not really listening to what he was saying. As much as I adore Liam, he does like to fuss.

'Okay, I'm going to have to go or I'll miss my flight,' he said. 'See you tomorrow night around seven.'

'Off you go, then,' I said, shooing them towards the door. 'Say goodbye to your dads, kids.'

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‘Goodbye, Daddiiiiiiiiieeeeeeees!’ shouted Autumn, in that annoying way small children like to speak.

‘Bye, Dad. Bye, Pappá,’ said Atticus, barely looking up from his phone.

‘No, that’s not good enough for me,’ said Niko, wrapping his long arms around Atticus.

‘You hug too hard, Pappá!’

‘It’s the Greek way. It shows how much I love you.’ He planted a big kiss in the middle of Atticus’s forehead, then scooped up Autumn for a farewell squeeze.

‘Do I get one too?’ I asked.

‘Of course, Yaya, the biggest hug for you.’

Niko gave me a tight embrace (which was very lovely), then Liam gave me a hug and thanked me again. He kissed Atticus and gave him a hug, then Autumn gave Liam a hug but didn’t want to let go, so I had to take her and give her another hug . . . Basically there was a whole

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lot of hugging until eventually Liam and Niko gave a final wave and left.

I shut the door and, after all the hullabaloo of the goodbyes, it was suddenly very quiet in my little cottage. Atticus was back on his phone – which was making tedious pinging noises – and Autumn was running up and down the hallway, occasionally head-butting the front door.

I got a squirming feeling in my stomach, like it was filled with prawns rolling around on little prawny roller skates. It was the feeling that I had made a mistake. A big one.

It was the first time I'd ever looked after the two children on my own. Niko had a conference in Birmingham on the same day that Liam had to be in Stockholm, which is how I ended up dumped with them. I can never quite remember what Niko does, but it's something to do with the environment. Essentially, he's one of the people who's going to save us when the ice caps

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melt and the world falls apart, which – at the rate we're going – looks like it's going to be sooner rather than later.

'I need a poo,' said Autumn, looking up at me with big, innocent eyes, as if she'd just told me she loved me. Those eyes don't fool me.

'Well, you know where the toilet is,' I said, pointing at the doorway under the stairs.

'You have to wipe my bottom afterwards.'

The prawns in my stomach were now doing double-speed somersaults. I'm too old and too dignified to be wiping little girls' pooey bottoms.

'Can't your brother do it?' I looked at Atticus.

He glanced up from his screen long enough to give a small, pained shake of his head, then wandered into the living room and plonked himself on my leopard-print sofa.

That pretty much tells you all you need to know about Atticus and Autumn, but to summarise:

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Atticus: 10 years old. Dull. Annoying.
Always on his phone.
Autumn: 3 years old. Wild. Annoying.
Needs help wiping her bum.

Now can you understand why I was dreading spending the whole weekend with them?

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Of course, at that point, I had no idea quite how catastrophic the next two days were going to be . . .

That was a little teaser, by the way – something to keep you interested, in case you got bored by that part where not much happened except a lot of hugging.

I won't go into all the (smelly) details, but safe to say, Autumn had her poo (so very, *very* smelly. What does that girl eat?!), and I held my breath and did the necessary wiping. Don't worry, I'm not going to mention *every* time someone in the story has a poo, but in this case it felt necessary. There is one more instance of a lot of poo coming up later, but again, I only mention it because it's integral to the story. If you're averse to big piles of poo, I suggest you skip over pages 287-293.

Afterwards, Autumn informed me that she was hungry. Instead of just telling me, like any

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normal child would, she let me know by opening and slamming all of my kitchen cupboard doors while chanting, 'Where the cookies?! Where the cookies?! Where the cookies?!' She sniffed the shelves as she went, like a hound on the hunt.

I'd finished off my last pack of ginger nuts the night before, so she had to make do with a Ryvita (which she did not enjoy) smothered in syrup-soaked plums (which she enjoyed a little too much). The plums were a gift from Uncle Edward about eight Christmases ago, which Autumn found by rooting around at the back of my odds-and-ends cupboard. They were a couple of years out of date, but that didn't seem to bother her.

She was just shovelling in the last mouthful when there was a loud thump on the front door. My first thought was that it was Liam or Niko – and my heart skipped a beat at the

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possibility that I might be able to return the kids already – but neither of them would thump that hard. In fact, I'd never had *anyone* thump that aggressively on my door, so it was clear that it was Not Good News.

'Someone's at the door,' said Autumn, slurring her words slightly. She hiccupped and fell off her chair. I checked the label on the jar of plums, only to discover that they were, in fact, soaked in rather potent brandy. My bad.

'Get the door, would you?' I said to Atticus, picking up Autumn and plonking her back on her chair.

Atticus tutted and sighed to let me know just how unimpressed he was about being dragged away from his phone, but he did as he was told. Once you know who was at the door, you'll realise I definitely shouldn't have let a ten-year-old boy go and open it on his own. Luckily, by the time Atticus got there, the person had gone,

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but they'd left something behind . . .

'Uh, GG, there's something on your door,' Atticus said from the hallway.

'GG' is what Atticus and Autumn call me. It stands for 'great-grandma', but we're not mentioning that word, remember? Also, this side note is ruining the dramatic tension of the moment.

I made my way from the kitchen to the door. Autumn followed me, bouncing off the walls and stumbling into the hall lamp as she went. Atticus was stood with the front door open, staring at the note that had been pinned to it. With a knife.

The knife was the length of my arm, with a golden handle and a curved blade, and someone had jammed it deep into the wood (totally ruining the paintwork). The note that was attached to it was brief and to the point. In thick black letters it said:

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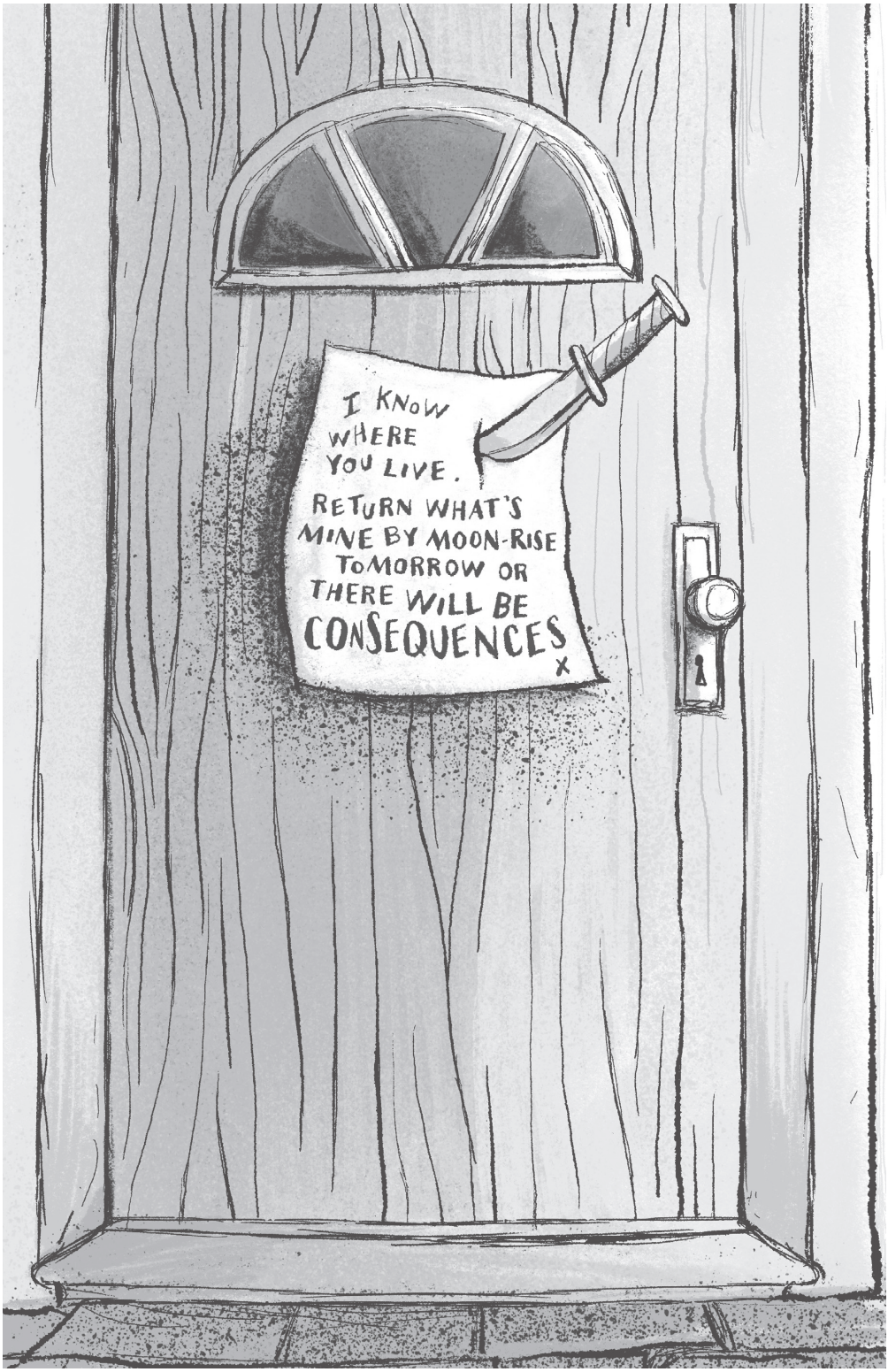
I KNOW
WHERE
YOU LIVE.
RETURN WHAT'S
MINE BY MOON-RISE
TOMORROW OR
THERE WILL BE
CONSEQUENCES
X

Chapter 2

By the look on your face (which really doesn't suit you, BTW), I'm guessing you're wondering why this is Chapter 2 when there was no Chapter 1. To be honest, I'm surprised you noticed. It just is, okay? I didn't know I'd be talking enough to need chapters when I started. There were all those pages where I was trying to get rid of you and you wouldn't take the hint, remember? So let's assume that last chunk was Chapter 1 and this is now Chapter 2. Who knows, maybe the next one will be Chapter 7 just to confuse you further. I'm a rule-breaker, get over it. Can I continue now?

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I pulled out the knife and whipped away the letter.

'Who's it from?' Atticus asked.

'No idea,' I replied.

'What do they want?' Atticus asked next.

'No idea,' I repeated. 'I'm sure it's just a practical joke, or maybe someone left it on the wrong door by mistake.'

'Whoever it was, they don't sound very friendly.'

'Whatever gave you that impression – the threatening letter or the massive knife?'

Atticus pressed his lips together, pulled out his phone and slunk back into the house. That's another annoying thing about children: not only do they say stupid things, but when you point out how stupid they are, they get all sensitive and upset about it. I haven't got time for that.

Autumn was at my feet, reaching up towards the knife in my hand.

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'I want to play with the sword,' she said.

'Absolutely not. After the amount of cognac plums you've just eaten, I wouldn't trust you with a teaspoon.'

Which made me think of teaspoons, which made me think of tea, which made me think how nice it would be to have a cup of tea. So I went inside and made myself one. Tea always helps calm my nerves in stressful situations. I've relied on it many times in the past, such as the time I drank three bottles of cherry Coke and couldn't stop burping for a week, or the time I accidentally blew up my next-door neighbour's guinea pig . . .

Don't worry, the little critter survived, even though it has the most ridiculous name the world has ever heard. I mean, who in their right mind calls their guinea pig Lord Foofington?

And the poor thing also happens to be exceptionally ugly. I'm not even joking; it looks like a slipper that's vomited on itself.

The tea helped. Next, I had to decide what to do about the letter. One thing was for certain: the kids were not safe in the house.

'Ratty, Scrag, get your coats, we're leaving,' I said.

That's what I call the kids: Autumn is Scrag because her hair is always so scraggly, and Atticus is Ratty because when he was born he looked like a rat. When I came up with the names, I was trying to be offensive, but it turns out they both quite like them.

'Leaving to go where?' asked Atticus with minimal interest.

Autumn came running into the kitchen with her arms sticking out.

'I'm an aeroplane!' she screeched.

'No, you're an annoying girl with her arms

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sticking out. Now put your coat on, or whoever left that knife in my front door will come back here and chop off your head.'

Okay, perhaps that was a little harsh, but it did the job; Autumn put her coat on without another word, so . . . meh.

'Oi, Ratty, get off your phone and put your coat on.'

'This is important,' he said without looking up.

'More important than getting stabbed in the head?'

(Hey, the threat worked for Autumn, so I might as well reuse it, right?)

Atticus's brow creased together like a smushed sandwich as he tried to work out whether I was being serious or not. Autumn thought the knife left in my door was a toy, but Atticus was smart enough to know that it was real.

'Are we in danger?' he asked.

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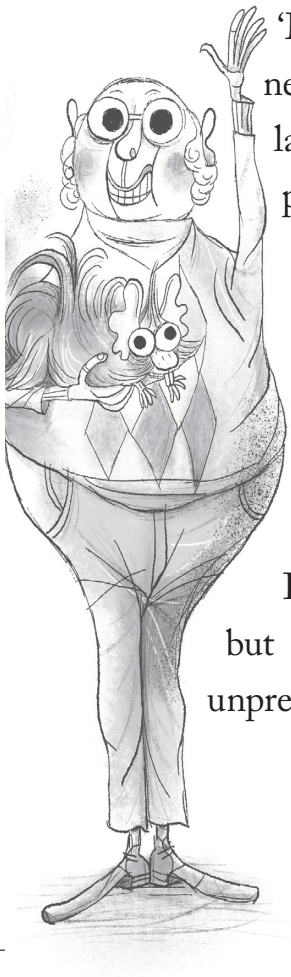
'If it'll get your bum out the door any quicker, then yes, yes we are.'

That seemed to do the trick. I pulled on my leather jacket and the three of us bustled out of the cottage. It was a bright spring morning and the sun was out, but there was still a chilly bite to the air.



'Morning, Nora,' sang Mr Pomp from next door. He was stood on his front lawn, stroking his vomit-slipper guinea pig.

'Morning, Percy,' I replied.

'Mr Foofington says good morning too,' he said, raising the creature into the air.

'I couldn't care less,' I replied.

And that was that conversation over.

I considered taking my motorbike, but Autumn was still swaying about unpredictably from the cognac plums and,

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knowing my luck, she'd probably fall off, so I decided we'd better walk instead. It wasn't far to my shop. We'd be safe there – for the time being, at least.

I own the florist's on the high street. Perhaps you've been there sometime? It's called Bloomin' Nora's. I know, the name is genius.

If you don't get it, ask someone more intelligent than you to explain; it's very clever.

I actually came up with the name first, many years ago, and I liked it so much, I decided I ought to be a florist, even though I knew next to nothing about flowers and had a severe allergy to pollen. Turns out I'm pretty spectacular at flower arranging, so that worked out well. Deaths are my speciality. If you ever need someone to spell out 'RIP' in quilled chrysanthemums, I'm your woman.

As we approached the shop, something an awful lot like sick rose up into my throat.

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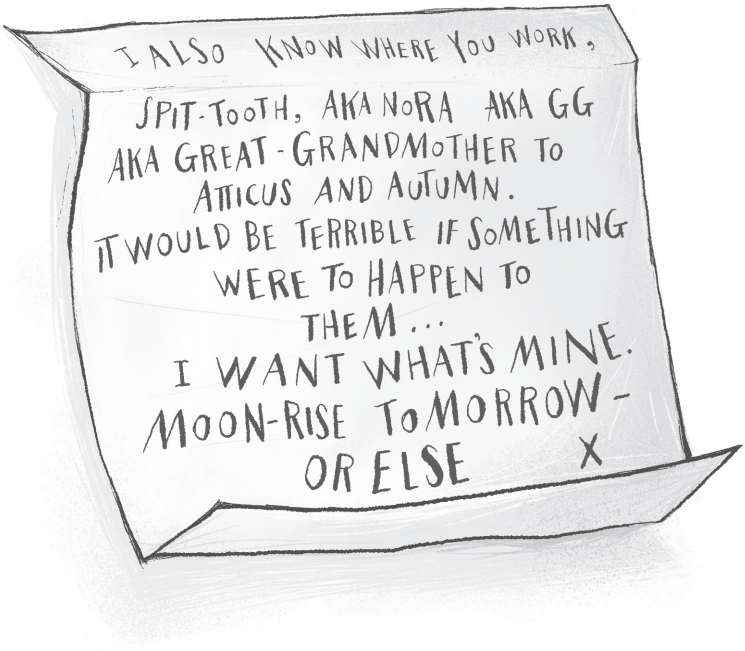
In fact, I'm pretty sure it was sick. (Let's be honest, what else would it be?) I swallowed it back down again.

The reason for the sick was the knife I could see sticking out of the front of the florist's. It was exactly the same as the one that had been left at my cottage, and it pinned a similar-looking note to my shop door. (Two lots of paintwork ruined in one day. Humph.)

When we were close enough, I tore the letter from the door without removing the knife. This is what it said:



I scrunched up the letter before Atticus had the chance to read it, but I didn't quite scrunch quick enough.

'That letter had our names on it!' he said.

He must have read it over my shoulder, gosh darn it.

'No, it didn't; you misread.'

'I didn't! It said "Atticus and Autumn".'

'Well, it must be referring to some other Atticus and Autumn,' I said with a dismissive wave of my hand.

'How many other Atticus and Autumns do you know?' he asked.

'Um, lots, actually . . . They're terribly common names.'

'Okay, who's Spit-Tooth, then?' he asked.

'No idea.'

'Who's the letter from?'

'Also no idea. No more questions.'

This is the point in the story where I probably

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need to tell you that I lied. In fact, I've lied a couple of times since I started speaking to you. I know I told you right at the start that I never lie, but, well, that was a lie too.

I lie all the time. I lied to Autumn last week when she asked me if I liked her new leggings (they were hideous). I lied to Liam last year when I told him I liked the colour he'd painted the outside of his house (also hideous – yellow? Really?!). And I lied to my most recent date when he asked if I'd had a good time, when the truth was it'd been the most boring two hours of my life (and his breath smelled of regurgitated tuna).

What *wasn't* a lie was my assertion that everything in this story is absolutely 100%, cross-my-heart-and-hope-not-to-fart, completely and utterly true. I promise you *that* is still true, although now you know I'm a liar, it's up to you to decide whether to believe me or not.

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There are a couple of other lies I've told during our short time together . . . Namely, when I said that I didn't know who'd left the letter pinned to my front door, or what it was they wanted. I knew both of those things perfectly well. I just didn't want Atticus to know, and I didn't want *you* to know either. (I haven't worked out if I can trust you yet.) What I will tell you is this: the person who left that note is the worst, most villainous person I've ever had the misfortune to encounter. They are the only person who has ever made me shiver in their presence, and I don't shiver easily. (Unless it's really cold and I've forgotten my cardie.)

Yes, sometimes I wear a leather jacket, and other times I opt for a cardigan; I'm a woman full of contradictions.

'Are we in trouble?' Atticus asked.

'Get in,' I said, glancing over my shoulder as I unlocked the front door of Bloomin' Nora's.

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The smell of a thousand flowers filled my nostrils. I bundled Atticus and Autumn inside and then followed them, swiping the knife out of the shop door as I did so. Now I had two knives, two letters, and two children looking at me with eyes like fried eggs.

I locked the door and switched on the lights, which immediately brought the shop to life, full to bursting with an abundance of colour: pink peonies and lemon lilies, indigo irises and purple periwinkles . . .

I know it's not really the time to be pointing this out (given that we'd just received two death threats) but isn't 'periwinkle' a funny word? Say it with me now. Periwinkle. Periwinkle. See – funny!

I tucked the knife behind the counter then opened the till and started taking out wads of cash.

'What's going on?' said Atticus as I stuffed a few tenners into my bra. 'You're acting weird.

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Weirder than normal, I mean. Who sent those notes? I know you know. You have to tell us.'

I stopped what I was doing and swiped a sweaty strand of hair off my face.

'Okay, fine,' I said. 'This is the truth, as much as I know. The letters were written by someone I knew a long time ago. Before you were born, before either of your daddies were born –'

'Before the dinosaurs were born?' Autumn butted in.

'No, Scrag, I'm not quite that old.'

'But you have so many wrinkles.'

'You try looking after two annoying kids all day, and you'll get this many wrinkles too.'

'I don't like wrinkles – they make you look yuck,' she asserted.

'Well, your face makes *you* look yuck,' I said, sticking my tongue out at her.

Autumn shrugged and wandered off to admire the tulips.

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‘Who is this person?’ asked Atticus, dragging us back on topic. ‘And what do they want?’

‘Trust me, the less you know about them the better.’

‘Are they going to hurt us?’

‘Not if I can help it.’ I crossed the room and pushed my way through a wall of vibrant sunflowers and towering gladioli to the secret door hidden behind them. I pulled out a key – which I keep hanging from a necklace around my neck – and slid it into the lock. The lock turned with a belly-rumbling thunk. I gave the door a shove with my shoulder and it swung open. A plump cloud of dust and flies puffed into my face. I pulled down a wall of cobwebs and spat out a spider that had somehow found its way into my mouth. I’d not been in my secret store for years. I’d had no need to. But the threatening letters changed everything.

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‘Is that some kind of secret store?’ Atticus asked.

‘Yes,’ I replied, blocking the entrance so he couldn’t peer in.

‘What do you keep in there?’

‘Secret things.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like children who ask too many questions. Now, stay out here and keep an eye on your sister. I’ll be back in a minute.’

I slipped inside, shutting the door behind me, and flicked on the light switch. All at once, my treasures were illuminated: glimmering halberds and slender axes, spiked maces and giant crossbows, a sabre engraved with ancient runes and a war hammer that was once wielded by Barfoot the Rugged. On the other side of the room was a rickety shelving unit containing all sorts of other trinkets: a brass telescope, a three-horned skull, pouches filled with

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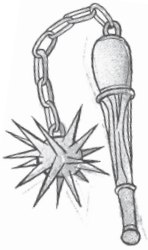
strange-smelling herbs, coils of thick rope, odd-shaped bottles containing shimmering liquids . . .

'Wow,' said Atticus.

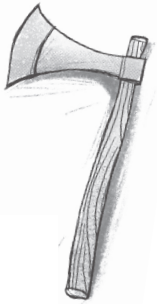
I spun around. He must have sneaked in behind me.



'I thought I told you to stay in the shop?' I said.

'Yeah, I guess you did say that . . . Oops,' he replied, with a sheepish grin.

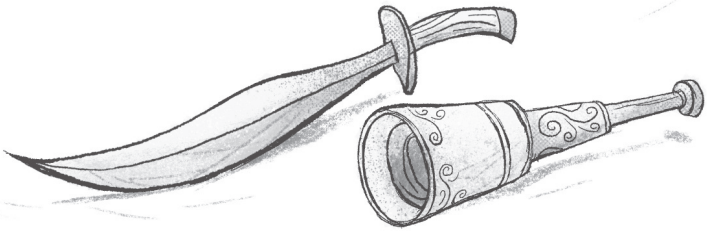
'Hmmm.' I frowned. 'I suppose I can't really blame you; I'm not great at doing what I'm told either.'



He reached out to touch one of my favourite swords.

'Don't touch that!' I said.

He jerked his hand away. 'What is all this stuff?' he asked.



'Just a few bits and pieces from when I was younger. I haven't always been a florist, you know.'

'What were you before?'

'All in good time, Ratty. All in good time. Right now, we need to pack. Here, hold this.' I tossed him an old bag made out of coarse, woven fabric, which hit him square in the face.

'Oops,' I said, with a sheepish grin of my own.

The bag was covered in dust, which made him cough and splutter as he opened it.

'Put this in,' I instructed, easing an extra-long axe from its place on the wall. Its maple handle was as smooth as ever and felt at home in my grip, even though my hand was considerably more weathered than the last time I'd wielded the weapon.

I handed it to Atticus, who wobbled under its weight. He looked from the axe in one hand to the modest-sized bag in the other.

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'That's never going to fit,' he said.

'Guess again.' I took the bag from him and opened it wide, offering it to him. With a sceptical look, he lifted the axe and slid it into the bag. Instead of hitting the bottom of the bag as expected, the axe kept on going, until the bag had swallowed it whole.

Atticus's jaw was on the floor.

Not literally; the floor was far too dirty for that.

'H-how . . .?' he spluttered. 'I don't . . .'

'It's called an infinity bag,' I said. 'But we haven't got time for you to be confused or impressed. All we have time for is to shove as much of this stuff into it as possible.'

I started tearing items off the shelves and dropping them into the bag. It swallowed everything up as if I was plopping peas in a pond,

without getting any bigger or heavier. Once the majority of the store's contents was inside, I went back through to the shop. Atticus followed me like a lost puppy.

Autumn was over in the corner, eating a bunch of daffodils. At least it was keeping her quiet.

'Okay, we've got everything we need,' I said. 'Let's get out of here.'

Three loud bangs on the shop door stopped me in my tracks and made my blood turn cold. Through the textured glass, I could make out the dark silhouette of a mysterious figure.

The person who'd left the notes had returned, and there was nowhere for us to hide.

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