



## Prologue

### Never Play with Fireworks

Dotty Parsons was sad. Immeasurably sad. Not least because ever since the accident nobody called her Dotty any more. Despite all her best protestations the firemen, the hospital staff, the social workers, the community police officer, in fact *all* the adults insisted on calling her by her full name: Dorothea. Apart from the simple fact that the name Dorothea didn't suit her (far too grown up a name for a nine and a half year old), Dotty's mum and dad had never once in her whole nine and a half years called her that. The only thing that had ever come close was when she had been exceptionally bad, in which case she was "DOROTHEA MADELAAAINE!" But never, not *ever*, was she plain Dorothea. Dotty longed more than anything to be Dotty again.

It had all happened on a Tuesday. There was nothing out of the ordinary about this particular drizzly November evening in suburban Cardiff: nothing that singled it out for disaster, except that it was bonfire night and Dotty's mum and dad had agreed, after much pleading from Dotty, to hold a firework party in their tiny back garden.

The party was the cause of great excitement for both Dotty and her best friend and classmate Sylv (short for Sylvia – a name her friend hated in its full form almost as much as Dotty hated her own). As a consequence, the afternoon at St Aidan's primary school had dragged on for what seemed like an eternity. With growing impatience they eagerly awaited the school bell and the evening's entertainment that was to follow.

Monsieur Evans' weekly French lesson, followed by a very damp and drizzly double PE with the ample Mrs Thwistletot (the most unlikely gym teacher the girls thought it possible to find) were both equally tortuous. But finally the bell went and the girls raced out of school, Sylv still wearing her netball banner, 'GK' emblazoned in forest green on front and back. Mrs Thwistletot waddled after them, waving

coats and remonstrating breathily in her thick Welsh accent:

“Now then girls, slow down! You’ve forgotten your jackets.” The girls giggled. “And mind you look both ways as you cross the road.”

“Come on Dotty I’ll race you home,” laughed Sylv, pulling on her anorak haphazardly as she ran.

Dotty’s house was on Wyvern Road, only two blocks and a single road crossing away from school. Sylv lived in the neighbouring semi. The fact that the girls had only been allowed to make the journey home together unsupervised since the beginning of the school year, and that there was still an element of novelty to it, only added to their excitement as they made their way back to Dotty’s. In fact such was their enthusiasm that they would have missed their daily pit stop for sherbet refreshers at Eddie Raman’s corner shop, perched rather conveniently at the end of Dotty’s street, were it not for Eddie’s son, Joe, calling out to them as they passed the ever-open shop door.

“Hiya, girls! You not buying today?”

Little Joe Raman was only seven and a half but already an experienced salesman. Coming to an abrupt halt, the girls found him in his usual spot behind the counter of the cramped and gloomy newsagents, wearing a disproportionately shocked expression, presumably at the thought of their failure to make their regular purchase from his father's store.

“No Joe – we can't stop today,” Sylv chirruped.

“We have to get back to Dotty's – her dad's doing a firework display.”

“Ah yes.” Joe nodded with enthusiasm. “Mr Parsons came in to purchase his fireworks for the display at 12.15 today. Bought every firework in the shop.”

The girls had rarely seen Joe this pleased. “Wow, your dad must have spent a fortune!” Sylv nudged Dotty.

Joe beamed. “Including our finest *Mega Rocket Mania* Home Firework Selection,” he gushed. “It seems he's really entered into the spirit of *Mr Fawkes*' special night this year. He's been putting the display together all afternoon.

Yes, I believe it's going to be quite the spectacle."

"Mr Parsons also came in at 12.35 for a packet of Starburst," Joe continued. "Then at 1.15 for a newspaper and a Kit Kat; then at 2.43 for a Curly Wurly, a packet of Monster Munch and a Mars Bar. Hungry work..." he mused. Dotty's dad was not the slimmest of men and had a notoriously sweet tooth, often sneaking out to purchase illicit confectionery when Mrs Parsons was not paying attention. "He hasn't been in since so I'm guessing he's finished it now."

"Pity I have to work," Joe observed wistfully. "Still, I'll see it from the counter if I keep the door open." He eyed Dotty pointedly.

"You're very welcome to come, Joe, if you can get someone to cover the shop for you," said Dotty, taking the hint. Joe hadn't been invited but Dotty didn't mind. She was quite simply in too good a mood to begrudge an extra guest, and she liked Joe.

"I'll go ask Jazz," he said, and darted off.

Jazz was Joe's fourteen year old sister. She was permanently in a bad mood and far too busy filing her nails and sneaking out to visit the

butcher's son, Gavin, to do anyone a favour, especially Joe, who she found a perpetual source of annoyance. It was much to the girls' surprise, then, that Joe returned a moment later with a jar of Black Jacks and a grin.

"She says she'll do it!" Catching their expression Joe winked and tapped the side of his nose theatrically, the grin breaking into a chuckle.

"Jazz'll have been sneaking out again then!" Sylv sniggered, elbowing Dotty as she did so. The pair giggled. Together the three blazed out of the shop, running the final fifty yards to Dotty's.

It was a small party that huddled in the by now rather wet back garden of Dotty's house: just Dotty and her dad, Sylv and Sylv's dad, little Joe Raman and Dotty's next door neighbours, Rita and Reggie Davis. The Davises had been invited by default on account of the fact that they were the Parsons' only other immediate neighbours and that their gardens were therefore adjoining. In truth, no-one really liked the Davises very much though.

Joe's musings had been right: Dotty's dad had spent much of the afternoon building a bold

display out of the fireworks bought from Eddie's, the *Mega Rocket Mania* 'King Mega Rocket' taking pride of place in the centre of the display.

“Congratulations, Mr Parsons, Sir,” said Joe formally. “A display to be proud of. Do you mind if I take a closer look at your fabulous efforts, Sir?”

“Sure, Joe, if you like,” said Dotty's dad. “Just don't touch anything,” he cautioned. “Took me ages, you know.”

Joe didn't answer. He was already busy reading the instructions on the back of the now empty 'King Mega Rocket' display box.

Sylv's dad was showing the girls how to write their names in the air with sparklers, Mrs Davis all the time tutting: “Careful now, girls. Fireworks are deadly things, mind,” and giving Sylv's dad dark looks when she thought the girls weren't watching (They had never got on ever since Sylv's mum had left, though Dotty didn't know why).

“Let them have their fun, Rita, they're fine,” counselled Mr Davis.

Mrs Davis shot Mr Davis a dark look too, and pursed her lips. “I'll go and help Gwennie,” she

snapped, referring to Dotty's mum, and stalked off into the kitchen, shooting Sylv's dad one final extra-dark look as she went.

Dotty's mum was inside pretending to check on the jacket potatoes, although everyone knew she was really fussing over her dogs, a couple of elderly and ill-tempered pugs named Chip and Pin, on account that they were afraid of fireworks. She caught Dotty's eye and waved through the kitchen window, mouthing "Hiya, Dot!" from behind the glass.

"Hiya, Mam!" Dotty waved and beamed excitedly.

Dotty's dad made some final adjustments to the display, huffing and puffing and fretting and muttering about inclement weather as he did so. "Hope they light, could be a damp squib, like."

Then came the announcement: "Okay, folks, I think we're ready to go," he wheezed.

There was a ripple of excitement in the modest yard. Dotty squeezed Sylv's hand tightly.

They waited. Nothing happened. Dotty's dad seemed to be having difficulty getting the first firework to light. He fumbled with an increasingly damp box of matches, muttering



something about the fuse being wet. The drizzle turned slowly into rain. An eternity passed.

“Sorry, folks, I’m going to have to go inside and find a lighter,” he said, and lumbered toward the kitchen door.

“Can’t we do something?” Dotty asked Sylv, exasperated. “If the fireworks don’t light soon, we’re going to be rained off.”

“My mam said never to play with fireworks,” cautioned Sylv. “You don’t know what might happen.”

At that moment Mr Davis sprang into action. “Now don’t you worry yourselves, girls, let’s see if we can work some Davis magic while Dotty’s dad looks for a lighter.” The girls eyed each other, and then Mr Davis, incredulously.

“I have a bad feeling about this, Dotty,” whispered Sylv nervously.

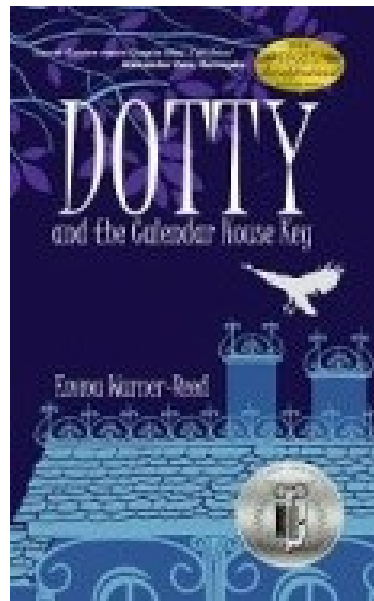
And then it happened. It was all over in a flash (and a bang), although everything seemed to be in slow motion. Mr Davis knelt down to light one of the rockets. Dotty’s dad must have seen him out of the kitchen window and ran to the glass, shouting and waving his arms.

“Reggie! Joe’s in the way... Joe, watch out! Reggie, NOoooooooo!!!!”

The rocket spluttered and faltered, and then there was a spark. Little Joe Raman was thrown backwards, his foot knocking the rocket stand as he fell, leaving the *King Mega Rocket* precariously angled towards the house. With a whizz and a cackle, the rocket set off. But instead of flying high into the air as it should have done, with a loud crack the huge firework made a bee line straight for the open kitchen door. There was the loudest clap of thunder Dotty had ever heard and a lot of smoke. Then the fire started. After that all Dotty could remember was the wail of fire engines and a lot of confusion.

There was nothing anyone in the garden (Dotty included) could have done to prevent the blaze. “Thank heavens there weren’t more casualties,” they said; though Dotty felt three adults and two dogs were quite enough, under the circumstances. And so it was that for the first time in her life Dotty was completely alone: without her mum or dad and without Chip and Pin. Dotty was scared and lonely. But the very worst thing was not the loneliness at all: it was that everyone insisted on calling her Dorothea.

At home Dotty had only ever been called by her full name when she was in big trouble; now she felt like she was alone, and in big trouble, all of the time.



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