

Chapter 1

Missing!

In which Sylv tells Dotty about Joe Raman's disappearance and Gobby scolds the dog

The familiar image of Dotty's best friend looked out at her from the iPad. Her bottom lip trembled, her complexion ashen. Dotty didn't ever think she'd seen Sylv looking so upset.

“Oh my word Sylv, what's happened?” Dotty asked. “Are you okay?”

“Can you come now, Dot? Can you just come to Cardiff? Please! I need your help.”

Dotty looked exasperated. “Is it your homework again? Look, you know I can't come hopping down the chimney every time you call. It's just not practical.”

“It’s not homework, Dot. It’s Joe. He’s...well, he’s *vanished!*” Sylv’s bottom lip quivered more violently and she broke into a sob.

“Vanished? What do you mean, ‘vanished’? Are you sure?”

“Yes I’m sure.” Sylv looked cross. “He’s gone missing. Plain disappeared. Look, Dot, I really need you to come. *Right now.*”

“Okay, Sylv. I’m coming. What have the police said?”

“That’s the thing,” wailed Sylv. “The police don’t seem to know anything. They can’t explain what happened. Joe went missing from his bedroom but he sleeps on the top floor and you can only get to his room by going through his sister, Jazz’s. There are a couple of skylights in the roof, but they’re way too small even for Joe to climb through, and you know how small he is. Jazz swears that she was in her bedroom all night and that she never saw him. But without walking past her there’s just no other way he could have got out.”

Dotty waited as her friend paused for a moment, convulsing with sobs, trying to catch her breath.

“The police are saying either he must have run away or, worse, that his family’s disappeared him! But of course that’s not true. It can’t be. Oh Dot, it’s terrible. Joe’s dad’s awful upset.”

Dotty tried to think of what her Mam used to say to her when she was crying. “Okay Sylv, now take some deep breaths,” Dotty soothed, using the most reassuring grown-up voice she could muster. “It’s awful about Joe, of course it is. But if the police can’t work it out, what do you think *I* can do?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Sylv replied, her tense, pale face staring up from the screen. “The police don’t know all the facts, do they? I mean, if he didn’t go out through the door, he must have left another way – like up the chimney.”

Dotty inhaled sharply, shocked. It hadn’t occurred to her that a sweep might be involved. A rogue sweep, even. This was the worst kind of news. Her mind raced with possibilities.

“Oh Dot, you’ve just got to come,” Sylv moaned. “I need you here now. You’re my best friend. Come on *but*¹, I know you can help. Puhleeeaaase! I want you here with me so we can figure this out together.”

In truth, Dotty had been on board since she heard the word ‘chimney’. “All right, Sylv, I’m said I’m coming, didn’t I? But just hang on until after dinner, can you? Gobby’ll go nuts if I miss my tea. You know what she’s like.”

“Yeah, okay,” Sylv conceded with a sniff.

“Right, then,” Dotty instructed. “Just sit tight. I’m on my way.”

*

The supper bell trilled impatiently in the distance. It was the cook, Mrs Gobbins (affectionately named ‘Gobby’ by the girls), calling her for supper.

Dotty’s life had changed so much over the last few months that it seemed almost

¹ Welsh for “friend”.

impossible now to remember the way things had been before. She still felt like the same feisty little Welsh girl inside, but since the tragic loss of her parents last November, everything was different. Her old life back in Cardiff seemed a world and a half away.

The accident had made the news.

“Local Couple Die with Family Pets in House Fire. Daughter Narrowly Escapes Blaze”

Dotty was haunted by memories of that night. If only she hadn't nagged Mam and Dad to have a firework party in the back garden of their small, suburban home. She remembered how excited she and Sylv had been, running home from school that afternoon, giggling and laughing.

And she remembered with bittersweet regret how much effort her dad had put into the display, buying up every firework from Eddie Raman's Corner shop, as Eddie's son, Joe, had taken great delight in telling the girls when they

stopped in for sweets on their way home from school.

But now she needed to get to Cardiff and to Sylv. She had to help Joe, if she could. The cross-sounding bell continued to ting-a-ling in the background, calling her impatiently. Dotty tutted to herself. Could she get away with it if she left right now? No, probably not. Gobby would be doing her numbers if Dotty let her supper go cold.

Dotty gestured to a fat old brown-and-white spaniel that lay across the doorway, forming quite an effective draught excluder.

“Come on, Geoff. Dinner time!”

Geoff jumped up eagerly, the years visibly dropping off him at the mention of food. Together the two hurtled down the back stairs that led into the kitchen.

“Sorry, Mrs Gobbins,” Dotty apologised as she poked her head around the kitchen door, anticipating the roasting she was about to receive for being slow to answer the bell. She

tried to look casual whilst attempting to hide Geoff's rather large outline behind her legs, only too aware of the cook's dislike of dogs in her precious kitchen.

The old cook was ladling homemade strawberry jam out of a vat of the stuff that teetered precariously on the corner of the dresser, slopping it into a smaller glass serving dish. As usual, she looked as if she had entered into a battle with the flour bin and lost.

The ladle slipped out of the cook's hands and landed back in the vat with a juicy *thwack*, splattering her with small sticky globules of jam. Together with the dusting of flour, it made her look like she had a severe case of strawberry jam measles. Dotty suppressed a giggle.

“And about time, too,” Gobby snapped as she man-handled the glass lid back on to the oversized container. “I thought you were never coming! Well, tuck in, girl. There are ham sandwiches and toasted teacakes, and there's a

nice slab of Christmas cake there. Oh,” she stopped herself. “I forgot the cheese.”

She bustled off in the direction of the larder, still covered in flour and spotted with jam.

“There’s a nice piece of Wensleydale out back. I’ll go fetch it.”

“There’s really no need, Mrs Gobbins, I...” she trailed off. Gobby was gone. Dotty had never understood the Yorkshire custom of eating fruit cake with a slice of cheese, or indeed of eating Christmas cake in March. Both seemed plain weird to her. But there was no point trying to change the woman’s mind once she had it set on something, so she just let the old cook put it on the table with the other tea things.

Dotty scooped up a plate, hurriedly filling it with food from the table that she did like. She needed to get to Sylv’s. She grabbed a couple of ham sandwiches for starters, the freshly-baked gammon spilling out of the soft homemade bread, butter dripping from them where the warmth of the meat had melted it. Her mouth watered. Despite her haste to leave, she was

actually quite hungry. She spooned a couple of round, crunchy pickled onions out of a jar and onto her plate. “Want one, Geoff?” she teased the overweight spaniel.

Geoff grimaced visibly, and Dotty laughed as he sniffed rather more hopefully at the baked ham. She knew that Geoff hated pickled onions, although from experience she also knew that he wasn’t past giving one a good suck if nothing better was on offer.

She was about to make a swift exit when Gobby came whirling back into the room with a gigantic round of cheese in hand. The ample woman fought to find a place for it on the already-full farmhouse table. “There,” she said, giving a satisfied nod. “That should be enough for a modest supper.”

Dotty snorted, her mouth full of sandwich. Modest! This table had never seen modest.

“I’d better get Mr Winchester’s tea tray ready. He’ll be eating in his study tonight.”

Dotty had never known Great Uncle Winchester to eat a meal anywhere *except* in his study. She raised an eyebrow in acknowledgement.

Gobby busied herself piling a tray high with sandwiches and teacakes, and fresh slices of Battenburg cake (one of the cook's specialities and Winchester's particular favourite). Then she set about warming the teapot on the great cast iron range, unearthing a tin of her employer's best gunpowder tea.

Dotty crammed her mouth full of sandwich, half sitting, half standing, as she tried to find an excuse to leave the table. Meanwhile Geoff skulked under the great scrubbed kitchen table top. Dotty suspected that he was waiting for the perfect moment to snaffle something from around the heavily laden table's edges. Although when Gobby took the tea tray out to his master, the dog would have plenty of opportunity to steal a meaty snack, she thought.

“Well, that should do.” Gobby gave a satisfied nod, surveying the heavily-laden tea tray.

“Why don’t I take that,” asked Dotty, seeing her chance to escape.

“No dear. You eat your supper. I’ll call Mr Strake. Sit yourself back down dear.”

Dotty had no choice but to oblige her. Gobby stepped neatly over to a small square panel on the kitchen wall and pressed one of the buttons. A bell rang in the distance. A moment passed and there was a cursory knock on the kitchen door. Not waiting for an answer, the door opened.

“You rang, Mrs Gobbins?” A tall, lanky figure stooped in the doorway. It was Strake. Dotty gave an involuntary shudder. Even if Gobby had not summoned him, instinct would have told Dotty it was her great uncle’s personal secretary before she ever saw him. The man appeared to carry about with him an uncomfortable air. It wasn’t anything Dotty could see, of course. Just a bad feeling that

seemed to follow him, infecting everything Strake came into contact with. If it had been visible, Dotty imagined Strake would have been stalking around bearing a damp, dark brown fog of sorts on that unnaturally curved back of his.

Strake, likewise, seemed to resent Dotty's presence in the kitchen. He twitched, nervously. No discussion had ever taken place between them about his thwarted attempt to steal the Calendar House Key from Dotty and her friends; or of how his failure had been received by the villains that he had tried to steal it for: the awful rogue sweep traders, Porguss and Poachling. Dotty reckoned they must have given him a roasting! Whatever had happened, Strake seemed to fear her now and, Dotty had to admit, she wasn't displeased with the result.

Even months after the event, Dotty was still angry at the thought of what these three had tried to do – stealing the precious Calendar House Key, so long thought lost. And all so that they could use the ancient sweeps' magic to take innocent children from their beds, forcing them

up the chimneys and away into a life of slavery in the cold and the dark of the world of the sweeps. She glowered at Strake. He winced in reply.

You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife, although, as usual, Gobby seemed blissfully unaware of anything other than the nose in front of her face.

“Mr Strake, would you take Mr Winchester’s tea tray in to him? I’m waiting on a batch of Welsh cakes and I don’t want them to burn.”

Strake quickly resumed his usual superlative air. “Certainly, Mrs Gobbins: nothing is too much trouble for Mr Winchester, of course.” He eyed the cook, rather pointedly, Dotty thought, as her were suggesting that the cook’s priorities should lay with their employer, rather than with her baking.

“Well, that’s settled, then,” she trilled. “You’d better hurry, Mr Strake, the tea will be getting cold. I’ve warmed the pot, but—”

Strake interrupted Gobby's speech by whisking the tray out of her hands with long, spidery fingers and, without another word, beating a hasty retreat out of the kitchen. He backed out of the doorway, as was customary for him. Dotty knew that he did this as a show of politeness or respect, but she couldn't help but think that Strake's real reason for not showing his back to the occupant of the room he was leaving, was for fear that they might be unable to resist the urge to stick a knife in it.

No sooner had the air cleared of the unpleasant atmosphere caused by Strake's presence in the room, but another figure loomed at the rear kitchen door. It was Kenny, the gardener. Kenny cut an altogether different figure, leaning heavily on the door frame in his usual casual manner. He smelled of dirt and earth and old tobacco. Dotty liked Kenny. She beamed at his arrival.

“Hiya, Kenny,” she mumbled through a mouthful of teacake.

“Hello, Miss Dotty,” replied Kenny. His face remained serious but a twinkle in his eye gave away the old Yorkshireman’s affection for her. “Mrs Gobbins, have you seen, Geoff? I have orders for his bath.”

Geoff flattened himself against the stone flag floor. Dotty watched the spaniel’s vain attempt to make himself undetectable with amusement. Clearly he understood the word ‘bath’.

“Certainly not, Kenneth. You know I don’t allow dogs in my kitchen,” Gobby snorted. She really didn’t like dogs, and in particular Geoff, Dotty guessed on account of the fact that he was always stealing food out of the larder, or even off the kitchen table if he could get away with it.

Dotty shuffled impatiently, itching to get going. She really wanted to see Sylv now. She studied the floor, trying not to give away the spaniel’s hiding place under the table, but it didn’t help. Kenny’s sharp old eyes quickly spotted Geoff’s brown and white paws poking out from beneath the tablecloth.

“Mrs Gobbins, I think you’ll find you have a stowaway,” he remarked wryly.

“Oh my legs and arms! That dog will be the death of me!” Gobby threw her flour covered hands dramatically into the air.

With two short strides, Kenny had the unfortunate mutt by the collar and was dragging him ungraciously out of his hiding place and the warmth of the kitchen, to his soapy fate at the mercy of the garden hose.

The cook turned to Dotty. “I assume you knew about this,” she accused.

At last, Dotty had found the perfect moment to make herself scarce. Hastily, she made her excuses. “Right, Mrs Gobbins, I’m off to, er, *Skype Sylv*”.

And before the irate housekeeper could scold her any further, Dotty got down from the table and bid a hasty retreat back to her bedroom.

Once there, Dotty took a deep breath, holding the locket firmly in the palm of her hand, as was her habit. Her fingers enveloped the heavy gold

lozenge, its sturdy chain still safely around her neck.

It wasn't that Dotty wasn't used to chimney travel by now. Dotty had travelled this way many times since the events leading up to last Christmas and her discovery of the Calendar House Key: a magical locket that her dear departed mother had buried deep inside the playroom chimney so many years before.

She thought back to the first time she had seen anyone travel through the chimneys: the shock appearance of Pip, the apprenticesweep, flying down her own bedroom chimney and appearing, soot-covered, on her hearth. And her discovery of a secret world of magical chimney sweeps that seemed to reside deep within the walls of the Calendar House itself. Back then she could never have known that her mother's hidden locket would turn out to be not just a piece of jewellery, but a key: a magical key that allowed ordinary folk to use the ancient sweeps' magick to travel from one chimney to another,

reaching almost anywhere in an instant, as long as it had a hearth.

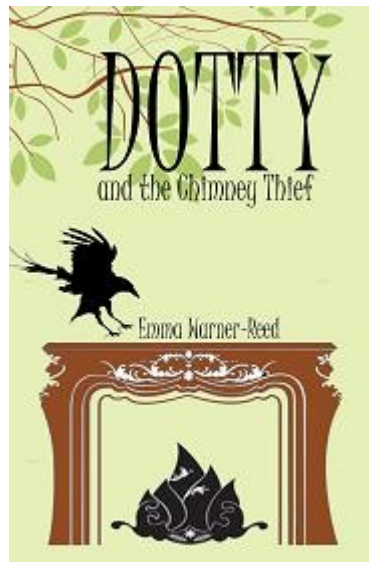
This locket was one of the few remaining portals created by the sweeps in times gone by, when magical and ordinary folk mingled together freely and openly, the sweeps keeping and guarding the hearths of all men and women here in Dotty's ordinary world.

And so it was that Dotty was well used to zipping up and down the chimneys; to visit Sylv in Cardiff, mostly (it beat TransRail), but also sometimes to travel from room to room within the vast mansion house that since the tragic death of her parents had become her home. My, what a strange and magical home it had turned out to be, Dotty thought.

Nevertheless, chimney travel was still an odd feeling. She closed her eyes for a moment. It wasn't exactly claustrophobic; it was over too quickly to have time to think about being crammed and whizzed through the thousands of tiny tunnels and passages that made up the network of chimneys both within the Calendar

House and beyond. But it was most certainly a strange sensation. It made Dotty's stomach flip, just like one of those swing boat rides at the fairground. Still, she had no time to muse over that now. She took one more deep breath.

“Hold on, Sylv, I'm on my way.” Dotty said to herself. And then, without further ado, she stepped straight into the fire.



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