

C H A P T E R

1

Clarissa Bell is more a reader than a maker of tales. She knows all there is to know of dragons and wizards, having read of them in countless books. From which she also knows all about the history of elves, fairies, trolls and goblins, as well as the mysterious habits of the basilisk, the phoenix, the griffin, and many other creatures. Clarissa thinks all of these to be make-believe, however, because she lives in a strange world where none of them actually exist.

Such a revelation might cause you to wonder if there are other peculiarities in Clarissa's world, and you would be right to wonder, as there certainly are. Take for a start the place where Clarissa lives. Her home is most peculiar. Being rather small, it is without doubt a peasant's dwelling. Constructed from small rectangular blocks, not of stone, but of baked clay, it has two floors. Very unusual for such a small building, I am sure you will agree. And, unlike the kind of place where a peasant would normally live, it has nowhere to keep livestock.

The strangeness of Clarissa's home does not end there, for it is full to bursting with wondrous peculiarities. Of particular note is a captive stream that flows throughout the building. As extraordinary as this may be, it is not the most noteworthy aspect of this particular peculiarity. A tributary of this stream initially traverses through a magical device that breathes dragon-flame, transmuting the water to hot before allowing it to flow throughout the dwelling.

How marvellous!

You will likely think the hot flowing stream to be more than enough magic, but Clarissa's home has something even more wondrous. From the ceilings hang magical lanterns that burn brightly yet emit neither flickering flame nor smouldering smoke. From where their power is derived is a complete and utter mystery, even to Clarissa.

And what of the girl herself?

Clarissa is fifteen years of age and relatively normal, although it has to be said that she does wear the strangest clothes – not a stitch of silk or lace to her name and certainly no gowns. Rather, she wears a kind of legging, an item of clothing that is similar to the type of hose traditionally worn by men, though hers are somewhat baggier and constructed from a rather coarse and heavy faded-blue material. This item of clothing hangs low on her hip, dangerously close to revealing her bottom. On the upper half of her body, when the weather is hot – as it happened to be on this day of writing – she wears an item that hugs her like a second skin, an item that resembles a male undergarment. The shoulder straps are much thinner though, and it is short, so short that her tummy is permanently exposed.

Some might find the sight of her tummy rather shocking. On it, or rather through the belly-button region of it, she wears a bolt of silver capped at one end with a ruby gemstone. This is surprisingly audacious of her, as she is a quiet, shy girl, and not normally prone to such an outward show of daring.

Clarissa has no friends to speak of, which is hardly a wonder really as she spends her entire waking hours immersed in some book or other kind of text. Perhaps this is the reason why, on most days, Clarissa visits a strange building called a library. For such a large building you might be surprised to learn that nobody actually resides there. Its sole purpose is to house books that people are allowed to browse within the confines of the building, or alternatively borrow and take away for a set period of time. Clarissa is an incorrigible and insatiable reader, and as a result does not stick to just one or two genres. Moreover, as a rule, she reads just about anything that takes her fancy. Often it will be the title that attracts her, or maybe even something as simple as the colour of the binding. Whatever the initial attraction may be, once she opens a book, once she reads that first sentence, she is hooked. Once hooked, Clarissa simply has to read to the end, even if she finds the tale tedious. Perhaps this says something of her nature.

One time, when she tried to leave a book half way through, she found sleep difficult to reach for five whole days; she simply could not stop thinking about what had become of the characters. On the sixth day she rushed to the library and read that very same book straight through to the end in two hours straight, allowing her eyes to blink only as the pages flipped. Since that day she has tried her utmost to only select stories she feels she will thoroughly enjoy, and the stories she tends to go for, the ones she mostly enjoys, are about perfectly normal everyday subjects of realism that revolve around dragons and wizards and magical adventure. Unfortunately, of this type, she has read all that the library has to offer. Actually, she has read each and every one of them many times over.

It is for that very reason, today, that Clarissa decided she would not visit the library. Instead she decided to look for a place with marvellous books, marvellous books that she has never read before. And what do you know?

She discovered a place that sells such books, a place that sells second-hand books. Old dusty books that were once owned, perhaps treasured, possibly loved, by other people. Within this treasure trove she hoped to find a book with room for her mind to explore, with gaps into which her imagination could delve. For like many an educated reader, Clarissa knows that the very best of stories are to be found in the spaces between the words. She knows that the words themselves, the inky marks on the page, are the story that everybody reads. Those printed words are fixed. Dive into the gaps, though, swim through the implications, let your imagination twirl and swirl, and you will likely discover a pearl of a story that is unique to you, a story that is yours alone. For it is in the untold, unexplored element of any written tale that a story truly comes to life.

C H A P T E R

2

Having already decided that she was not going visit the library that day, Clarissa Bell sat up in bed, looked around her perfectly ordinary bedroom, and delighted in the fact that it was a Saturday.

“Best day of the week,” she said out loud, remembering that very line or similar from a book she had once read. Reciting lines from books is quite typical of Clarissa— usually in her head though, not out loud. Only crazy people talk out loud when there is nobody to listen. Clarissa has nobody around to listen – most of the time – but, for the record, Clarissa is not crazy.

To make ends meet, Clarissa’s mum juggles three jobs. Saturdays she works at large supermarket that sells just about everything a person could want as well as many things that they would not want, giving Clarissa the run of the house. Weekday mornings she cleans at a bar and evenings she works in a fast-food place. Sundays she sets aside to catch up with her sleep, though Clarissa would say that the sleep was catching up with her mum. As a rule, therefore, Clarissa rarely sees much of her mum, which suits her just fine. Such a statement might make it seem that Clarissa does not love her mum, but that could not be further from the truth. Clarissa loves her very much. She just loves having the house to herself, and finds a heavenly pleasure in the silence of her own company. With no interruptions she can wander through the pages of a book and enjoy getting completely lost in the magic of somebody else’s story rather than know exactly where she is in the mundane reality of her own. Rita Bell does not really get her; that is the problem. *You spend far too much time with your head in books*, she will often say, *and you’ll amount to nothing, Clarissa, just like your good-for-nothing dad.*

Clarissa’s dad’s waste of time was worse than Clarissa’s, however, as far as Rita was concerned, at least. He had fancied himself a writer, but despite producing a vast proliferation of words, he never managed to execute the sorcery of turning those words into money. Clarissa barely remembers him. She does recall that every night he used to tell her stories,

made up stories, not stories from books but stories from his imagination; she remembers that much, and remembers it with a fondness that often makes her sigh. He would read magical stories while she was snuggly tucked in bed. Some of the things feel like memory, but Clarissa believes they have just been implanted over the years by her mum's constant whinging since he left, such as telling him he should get a proper job and earn some actual money. But he could not. He felt compelled to write.

Nine years ago, just after Clarissa's sixth birthday, Martin Bell just up and left, taking all of his stories and nothing else – not even a change of socks. Mrs Bell and Clarissa came home to find him gone. No dad, no stories, just a profusion of mismatched socks.

Lying there, looking at the wig of dust on the naked bulb above her bed, thinking about being six years old and listening to her father telling his stories, Clarissa recalled the words her mother would often say to try and make her feel better: *he's out there somewhere*, she would state, allowing her eyes to drift to some distant unspecific location, *no doubt lost in one of his stories, and one day, maybe, if he finds his way to the end of that story, he might come back home*. Somehow, as is often the case with carefully chosen, well-meaning words, Clarissa found this an equal measure of comfort and disturbance.

Clarissa decided to reset the alarm clock and sleep a little longer. It was a Saturday after all. Maybe she would be able to pick up the dream she had been having about a princess who lived in a realm of dragons and wizards and wondrous magical adventure. On the verge of setting a later time for waking, however, she realised that she had already done that very thing an hour ago. It was already half past ten, and on discovering the time, her stomach grumbled a complaint of breakfast having not yet been delivered.

If I was the princess of my dream, she fantasised, *servants would wake me with a cooked breakfast of bacon and eggs and mushrooms and tomatoes, or whatever the magical equivalent might be. The tendril-like aroma of something sizzling would drift up the stairs and hook me like a dragon lured by nectar*. She berated herself, realising that a dragon would offer resistance, realising that it was a rubbish analogy and knowing that her story-telling dad would likely have conjured something much better. The entire thing was immaterial anyway. There was no delicious sizzling scent in the kitchen, and there was no egg white bubbling and spitting its celebratory dance around an inviting golden-yolk. The house was absolutely silent and completely devoid of inviting aromas.

With some reluctance, Clarissa pulled back the warm sheets, swung her legs from the bed and padded across the bare floorboards. Shivering, she examined herself in the cracked mirror of her wardrobe door, a wardrobe that, unfortunately, had no magical back leading to faraway lands of mystery and adventure. She grimaced at the sight, the sleeves and legs of her pyjamas hanging around three-quarter length, the material so distorted that the back hem twisted all the way around to the front.

“Three years I’ve had these pyjamas,” she moaned, thinking life so unkind.

She had hoped for a new pair. She had hoped for a nice, silky, well-fitting pair for her recent birthday. Enough hints had been dropped. Right up until the previous Wednesday she had dropped hints. And come last Thursday what did she get? A pair of manky, cheap, ill-fitting jeans, that’s what, and a vest top which was already too small and failed to cover her stomach: cheap clothes, no doubt drastically reduced in price because nobody else wanted them: shop’s own label stuff from the crappy supermarket where her mum works.

When she pulled on the jeans, as they slumped below her non-existent hips, the legs ruckling over her feet, Clarissa groaned in disappointment. She narrowed her eyes, looking at her reflection, and spoke mockingly in her mother’s tone of voice, “‘*All the girls wear them like that, Clarissa*’. Yes!” she told the mirror, “but only if they’re meant to be hipsters. *These* are definitely not hipsters!” Of course, on the actual day, when she unwrapped them, she had quietly thanked her mother and sloped upstairs to try them on.

A few tears and a splash of cold water later, she went down in them, managing to force a smile onto her face. There had to be a fashion parade whenever she got new clothes. That was when Rita Bell discovered Clarissa’s belly piercing. ‘A waste of money,’ was all she said before sucking through her teeth and shaking her head, her face drawn into a pinch of disapproval. Somehow Clarissa would have preferred her mother to rant, to really kick up a fuss, but she didn’t.

Rita Bell never did.

The piercing was out of character. Not a Clarissa type of thing at all.

The idea of getting the piercing had invaded her mind the very morning before her fifteenth birthday, the instant aunt Patricia’s card had dropped through the letterbox. Before even picking it up from the doormat, she knew it was from her aunt because Uncle Steve’s always came a week late. Aunt Patricia’s card always came a day early and always contained more money than Uncle Steve’s. She normally made the money last all year, spending a small amount here and a little there, but on this occasion some compulsion had forced her to steam open the envelope, remove the money and get her bellybutton pierced on the way home from school. The thought of getting it done, twirling her gut and teasing her mind all day, had been exciting. Immediately afterwards she felt exhilarated, as if she’d committed some kind of wonderful sin. While walking home, her mind drifted to wondering what her dad would have thought about it if he had still been around.

Maybe he would have included it in one of his stories.

Clarissa turned sideways on to the mirror in order to get an observer’s view of her reflection, and examined the piercing. A glimmer of sunlight stealing through a rip in the curtain glinted on the fake ruby. She had actually wanted the pale-blue stone, desired it, because it matched the colour of her eyes – her best feature, in her opinion – her Dad’s eyes,

apparently. Compensation for the mousy-brown hair – slightly frizzed from all the split ends – that she had inherited from her mum. They only had the blue-gem on a gold bar though, and she definitely did not want gold. *Gold might be more expensive than silver, but it looks cheap.* A known fact, she told herself. *Gold looks like brass! People who buy gold rather than silver have more money than taste.* Besides which, the gold bar was financially out of reach. The silver one had left enough for bus fare home, and even a few spare coins to feed to her ravenous pottery pig.

Around the piercing, her skin had turned red and was now slightly swollen. “I still can’t believe you did it,” she said out loud, injecting her voice with a tone of shock, as if speaking to someone else, giving a rueful smile and not quite believing the piercing was actually there.

On her face, she noticed an expression that she did not seem to be fully in control of. She decided it was a look of disdain, and as she read that look she knew what it was implying. It was saying *you’re not cool enough for such a thing Clarissa, and you shouldn’t have had it done. You wasted your money.*

“Don’t you dare!” she snapped, as if admonishing the voice in her head. “Don’t you go and start regretting it. It’s about time you did something different, Clarissa. That’s exactly why you’re not going to the library today.” She pinched a smirk between tight lips as she realised how silly such an outburst would look to an observer. *Do other people talk to themselves as much as I do?* “It’s times like this when one could do with a Daemon,” she said, lending her voice an air of superiority, like the queen or something, “then, one would not be talking to one’s self in the mirror, would one? No, one would not, Clarissa. One would instead be asking one’s Daemon what he thought of the piercing.”

Not for the first time that morning, a growl in her stomach reminded her that she had not eaten since yesterday’s school lunch – free food, by the way, that lets everyone know you’re poverty stricken. While heading for the kitchen she imagined the disapproval in her Daemon’s words: *I hate the piercing, Clarissa; it makes us look silly.* To which she vocalised a reply with a rather aloof sounding air. “That is exactly what I thought you would say, and the very reason I did not seek your opinion in the first place.”

In the musty air of the kitchen, as she opened the pantry door and squinted into the gloom, she imagined what form her Daemon might take if such things were to really exist. Naturally, it would align with her personality and temperament. She fancied it would be a roe deer: really cute and shy and rarely seen, or perhaps a red squirrel: timid, bullied by the more numerous and decidedly ordinary greys. In consideration, she thought a common house mouse would be more probable. Still, even a mouse would be good. Certainly a mouse would be better than nothing.

I’d call it Ariel, she thought, fleetingly wondering why the name felt as if it had been planted in her head as she scanned the shelf and considered breakfast choices. They turned

out to be the usual ones: stale bread (toasted), or stale cornflakes (soft). The bread had bloomed over night and sported a patchwork of greenish-blue spores. *Cornflakes it is then*, she decided, as if there was a real choice to be had, tipping the cornflake box and huffing as they spilled into the bowl with hardly a clatter. “Cheap shop-brand cornflakes always go soft within four days of opening,” she told Ariel. “It’s a known fact.” She made a mental note to one day write such things down – *known facts: A fifteen-year-old girl’s perspective*.

“They’re all we can afford Clarissa,” she sniped, mocking her mother’s words as she opened the fridge and grabbed the milk (tepid). “Why can’t we have a fridge that works, like normal people do?” she screeched.

Something else that was great about being in the house on her own: she could scream and shout her disappointment as loud and for as long as she liked.

Bringing the milk to her nose she took a cautious sniff. “Urgh!” She dry heaved. “Sour! Putrid! Sick! I mean, purrrlease, a fridge that keeps things cold; it’s not exactly magic, is it?”

Skipping breakfast altogether, feeling she had little choice in the matter, Clarissa left the house in a huff. At the end of the path, she paused and returned and gave the door a good shake, just to make certain the latch had caught. There may not much in there worth nicking, but someone still would, given the chance. “It’s a known fact,” she told Ariel. “There’s always someone worse off than you.” Though at that very moment, she struggled to imagine how such a thing could be possible.