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**Ruby Redfort: Catch Your Death**
**Ruby Redfort: Feel the Fear**
PICK YOUR POISON
BY LAUREN CHILD FORT YOUR POISON

HarperCollins Children’s Books
For Louis
The queen looked out from her window and down upon Snow White.

Gazing at the girl’s raven-black hair and flawless skin made the queen sad.

“How good she is, how well loved,” she hissed, plucking up a rosy red apple. Turning it in her hand, the queen caught sight of her image in its perfect polished skin. “Is there a person who loathes her other than I?” Letting out a cry of rage she brought the apple to her lips, opened her mouth and sank her teeth into its white flesh.
WAY OUT TO THE NORTHEAST OF THE CITY WERE THE FLATLANDS, acre upon acre of prairie grass that waved in the warm winds blowing in from the ocean.

The girl was taking the long road to her grandmother’s ranch house. She imagined it would take her no more than an hour, so she would still be in good time; she had promised to be there by noon. The weather station had warned of an electrical storm and dark clouds were already forming in the great skies above her.

The girl had tried to coax her dog, a young husky pup, to travel with her in her bicycle basket, but the dog had looked up at the sky and howled when she tried to carry him from the house, his fur standing right on end.

It was as if he knew what was coming. There had been talk of a tornado looking to bear down and she had a mind to see it begin to pick up before it whirlled in. Timing, she knew, was everything when it came to tornadoes. They could whip up quick and vanish in minutes, the average for these parts being around twenty. You had to be careful – you mistime it and you
might be snatched up inside that wind funnel, for you could not outrun a tornado, only sidestep it; this her nine-year-old self knew for a certainty.

She hadn’t travelled more than halfway there when she realised she had left it too late. Turn back, keep going, it didn’t matter – she was never going to make it to the ranch before the storm struck. A lone tree grew out from the only raised piece of land in more than a hundred miles, a tree bent sideways by the relentless west wind and the only landmark on the whole horizon other than the marching telegraph poles.

But it was a good landmark. She remembered how the tree grew out of rock, not a cave exactly but a pile of stones so heavy that they looked like they hadn’t moved in more than ten thousand years. The girl saw at once that if she could make it to those rocks and climb between them then she would escape the tornado’s hold.

She let go of her bike and abandoned it right there, where it fell, on the tarmac road. She began to run across the open grassland, feeling the whipping wind as she fled. She ran, ran like the devil himself were chasing her, ran like all hell was biting at her ankles. The coarse grass was slurring her movement, wrapping about her legs, but she wouldn’t let it pull her down. There were the rocks and the half cave. She threw herself in just as the whirling funnel picked up over her head, and through the crack in the stone she saw her little green bicycle hooked up by the finger of wind and pulled high into its centre.
She didn’t notice the hissing thing: the wind drowned out its sound. Nor did she notice it raise its head and open its jaws wide, exposing those perfectly sharp prongs of teeth. She felt it though: a sharp pain followed by a sickening ache. A strange sensation.

She turned to look it in the eyes. Black eyes set in an arrow-shaped head, dark diamonds running down its brown back. She looked at it, unblinking, as it slowly wound itself back into the shadows.

Suddenly everything became hyper real, the strange crag of the rocks, one jutting stone looking almost like a dog’s head – she thought of her husky and wished he was at her side. She tried to steady her breathing and reached for the notebook and pencil she had tucked inside her pocket. She drew the head shape and the markings, making a note of the colours, and once she was sure she had all the information, she removed the sneaker from her left foot followed by her striped sock, cutting away the toe part with her penknife. Then she pushed her arm into the tube of knitted cotton and slipped it over the wound, not too tight but enough to support her deadening limb.

Slowly she began to move herself towards the road, keeping her arm down so that the bite wound was below her heart.

Looking behind her she saw the tree was gone, carried away by the tornado.

The farmer who drove by in his truck an hour later was surprised to see this young girl stumbling down the road on her own.
The doctor on duty in the local hospital was astonished when upon arrival she produced a notebook containing a perfect drawing of a Western Rattlesnake.

‘That’s... what... bit me,’ she said, her arm badly swollen by now and her voice losing its strength.

‘Smart of you, noting everything down like that,’ he said as he injected the antivenom. ‘Rattler venom can kill in two hours. If we’d wasted any time trying to identify the species, well…’

Which was why from that day on Ruby Redfort resolved to know every snake by the pattern of its skin – such knowledge might just save your life.
WHEN RUBY WAS TEN her father was due to take part in a tasting for the Olivarian Society, so called because in order to become a member of this esteemed club one had to blind taste twelve different types of olive, identifying the variety and the region in which they grew.

For reasons to do with bad weather in Boston, Sabina Redfort had failed to make her Twinford flight and was stranded at the east coast airport. Mrs Digby the housekeeper was on annual leave, Brant Redfort refused to leave his daughter home alone and his daughter refused to have a sitter. Therefore it was decided that Ruby would have to accompany her father to the club on Fuldecker Avenue, a grand old-fashioned building with plenty of carved wood and marble. It being highly irregular to bring a child to the club, Ruby was taken to the small club office, where she might read and wait out the two hours until her father was ready to go home.

Brant Redfort was blindfolded and led to a table on which twelve olive dishes were then placed. There were three olives
that Brant Redfort found very difficult to place, but he filled in what he could and, once finished, his completed papers along with the olives were returned to the club office.

Ruby, who was fond of olives, had been his home-study partner and now had a very keen palette and a wide appreciation of olives from all regions. She decided therefore to take the test herself and, finding her father’s answers to be good but not great (considering the time he had given to this pursuit he should really have excelled), she amended his test sheet accordingly.

She detected every herb and every spice, and almost every variety of olive: young, old, barrelled in oak, pickled in sea brine, from the western slopes of Mount Etna and from the northern coast of Corfu.

Brant Redfort was declared a worthy Olivarian and was sworn into the club with a hearty cheer, and Ruby was able to get back to her book.

Some several years later...
Chapter 1.

Wrong place  
wrong time

WHEN RUBY REDFORT AROSE THAT MORNING, she could not have foreseen what kind of day it was going to turn out to be.

She certainly hadn’t meant to find herself running for all she was worth down the Amster back alleys, nor had she pictured how grateful she would be to see that dumpster in front of the Five Aces Poker Bar. It just happened that way. Sometimes things unfold in a way you could never predict.

**RULE 1: YOU CAN NEVER BE COMPLETELY SURE WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN NEXT.**

Actually, at the moment when she left the house, Ruby was expecting her Saturday to be entirely peaceful. Expecting and hoping. She hadn’t been sleeping well recently, and she wasn’t exactly feeling sharp. She was planning to nod hello to Ray Penny as she entered his secondhand bookshop; if the mood grabbed her she might even ask after his dog, Jake, who was recovering at the vets having poisoned himself by eating an entire bar of chocolate. Then she would browse the shelves for a good thriller and sit down to read. She didn’t feel like too much human
interaction today.

True to the weather report, the wind was really beginning to take a hold, and as she headed down Cedarwood Drive her usually tidy dark hair was yanked free from its barrette and was now wildly wrapping across her face and over her glasses, making it very hard to see.

The ‘gusters’, as Twinford folk referred to them, had been blowing for the past fortnight, ever since the night of the Scarlet Pagoda Film Festival, an evening Ruby would never forget, for although it was not the first time she had fallen from a tall building, it was the first time she had been pushed from the top of one.

The building in question had been the Hotel Circus Grande and the pusher had been thief and psychopath Lorelei von Leyden. Ruby had not been the target, she had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time and, now Lorelei was incarcerated in a maximum security jail awaiting trial, Ruby could sleep more easily. Ruby felt Lorelei was one of those people who just might bear a grudge.

As she turned the corner into Main, Ruby spotted Del Lasco striding out of the recently opened Slush Store, her left hand gripping a blue ice drink, her right hand, newly sprained, in a sling and her face wearing a sour expression. Ordinarily Ruby would have been pretty pleased to see Del but on this particular afternoon she sensed something was brewing. Eleven seconds later and this feeling of foreboding was confirmed as Del and
Ruby’s Junior High nemesis, Vapona Begwell, marched out of the store followed by several of her cronies. It was obvious to even the casual observer that Vapona wasn’t about to ask Del the time of day.

‘You wanna say that again, Lasco?’ Vapona shouted. ‘I didn’t quite catch it.’

‘You heard me, Bugwart,’ said Del.
‘So say it to my face, if you dare.’
‘If you’d point me in the direction of your face, I’d be glad to,’ replied Del.

Vapona didn’t wait for another insult, nor did she try and extract an apology, she just clenched her fist and aimed to sock Del right slam in the mouth, only Del, who was used to kids taking a swing at her, ducked and Vapona found her fist making contact with friend and sidekick Gemma Melamare, and it was Gemma’s dainty little snub nose that took the hit.

The sound that came out of Melamare’s mouth made everyone freeze in their tracks; everyone but Ruby. She took the opportunity to yank Del by the hood of her sweatshirt and propel her right across the road towards the back alleys off Amster. Vapona’s gang, spellbound by what had just happened, took a minute to realise Del Lasco had left the scene.

‘Hey! Come back here Lasco, you chicken liver.’
‘Run!’ shouted Ruby.

Del let go of the blue slushy and she ran. They both did. They fled down the back of the minimart and along the alley
that joined Maize, over the street (car brakes screeching and horns honking) and on through the next two alleyways, across Maple, across Larch, across Fortune, and beyond, heading east to the busy road that was Crocker with all its countless seedy bars and secondhand shops filled with nothing you would ever want to buy.

They could hear Bugwart and her pals not so far behind, their voices yelling out across the fenced passageways. They kept running: only trouble was, there was nowhere to hide, no more back alleys on Crocker, just a long wide strip of flat road and bars, pawnbrokers and gambling outlets, nowhere for a kid to blend. When they reached the Five Aces Poker Bar, Ruby realised they were in trouble. Bugwart wasn’t giving up and though Ruby, using the parkour skills that Hitch had taught her, could now easily climb a low-rise and sprint across the roofs, Del with her sprained hand and lack of parkour skills could not.

Which was how come they ended up scrambling into the Five Aces dumpster and pulling down the lid.

Undignified for sure, but as the old saying went, beggars really can’t be so choosy and (if you wanted another one) any port in a storm.

Or, as Ruby’s Rule 73 had it: **SOMETIMES YOU JUST HAVE TO WORK WITH WHAT YOU’VE GOT.**

Unsurprisingly, it wasn’t a nice place to hang out, and Ruby was at that moment regretting her decision to leave the tranquility of her bedroom and venture out into the big bad world.
They could hear Vapona talking to her gang.
‘Where did they go?’
‘Beats me.’
‘They just disappeared!’
Thump.
Vapona slammed her fist on the dumpster.
‘We lost em.’ She sounded pretty angry about it. ‘When I find Lasco, I’m gonna pulp her!’ To illustrate this intention, Vapona thumped the dumpster again, this time so hard that Ruby felt the thud vibrate through her.

The two of them listened to Vapona’s gang’s footsteps as they receded back towards Amster, their dread threats becoming less and less audible until only the thrum of passing cars could be heard.

Twenty minutes later – Ruby wasn’t taking any chances – they struggled out like earwigs emerging from debris.

They brushed themselves down, Del picking a fish head out from Ruby’s hooded top, Ruby peeling chewing gum from Del’s jeans, then they shook hands.

‘Congratulations Lasco, you’re alive,’ said Ruby.
‘But I smell like I died,’ said Del, sniffing the air. She looked at Ruby. ‘Your glasses look wonky.’

‘That’s the least of my problems,’ said Ruby. ‘Listen, nice bumping into you and all but I think I gotta take a shower,’ she called as she strode off towards home. The garbage smell was making her nauseous and she needed to clean up before the
stench knocked her out.

‘Thanks for your assistance anyway,’ called Del.

‘No problem,’ shouted Ruby, breaking into a run. She felt this day could surely only get better, that was until the wind blew her hair over her eyes and – vision impaired – she collided with a parking meter.

Winded, she sat down for a moment on the sidewalk.

A banana skin fell from her sleeve.

It had to be said, this was not the kind of day she’d expected.
Chapter 2.

News travels fast

As Ruby stumbled in through the kitchen door, Greg Whitney’s voice jingled out of the radio:

‘SO THOSE WINDS LOOK LIKE THEY REALLY MIGHT HIT HARD.’

‘YOU GOT THAT RIGHT,’ replied Shelly the weather girl. ‘THEY ARE REALLY BEGINNING TO WHIP UP AND IT WON’T BE LONG BEFORE TWINFORD CITY EXPERIENCES SOME VIOLENT STORMS.’

‘RAIN TOO, SHELLY?’

‘YOU CAN COUNT ON IT, GREG!’

Mrs Digby put down her apple peeler and planted her hands on her hips. The dishevelled state of Ruby was one thing; the smell of her a whole lot worse.

‘Child, have you been crouching in a garbage can by any chance?’

Ruby opened her mouth to explain but the housekeeper put up her hands.

‘Before you make up a whole bundle of untruths, I might as
well tell you that Mr Chester saw you climbing out of a dumpster and he didn’t wait more than a minute before dialling up my number and spreading the good news.’

Ruby rolled her eyes.

‘The man is a virtual loudhailer of other people’s business,’ said Mrs Digby, ‘if you can call crouching in a garbage can “business”.’ She tutted. ‘Not that it would have escaped my keen eye that you look like something the cat dragged in but, that said, whatever you have been up to, and for whatever reason you thought it necessary, one thing’s not up for discussion: you need to take a bath.’

Ruby sniffed the air. ‘Yeah, it was sorta rancid in there.’

‘I thought you were lying low today?’ said the housekeeper.

‘I was trying to, and then I bumped into Del Lasco.’

‘Say no more,’ said Mrs Digby. ‘That child will have you banged up in the Big House before you can say, “call my lawyer”.’

Ruby went upstairs to her room, set the shower running and scrubbed the dumpster dirt out of her pores. She sprayed herself with a large waft of Wild Rose scent and put on some clean clothes – a pair of jeans, striped socks and a T-shirt. Like most of her T-shirts, it said something, this one bearing the words: I’ve heard it all before. She put on her glasses and could immediately see that there was a problem. The fall into the dumpster had bent them out of shape and the left arm no longer made contact with her left ear, so the glasses now sat at a strange angle. Since right at that moment she had no idea where she had put her spares,
she would have to resort to her contact lenses: without either option, life was a total blur.

Once that was taken care of, she took a book from the bookcase and sat down to read.

Ruby owned a lot of books, ranging across all subjects. She read for every reason: inspiration, information and escape. If she valued any of her books above the others, perhaps the ones she would single out would be her code books. After all, it was her interest in codes that had landed her a job at Spectrum, an organisation so secret it was hard to know who actually controlled it, and who it was actually working for. All Ruby really understood was that the agency was on the side of good, a fact she had taken at face value when LB, her boss and head of Spectrum 8, had told her so.

Along with the job came her own personal minder and protector, a field agent who went by the name of Hitch and who disguised his true purpose by acting as the Redfort family household manager (or butler, as Ruby’s mother preferred it). He could have fooled anyone, and did fool everyone. To the outside world Hitch was one of those enviable assets – a manager who ensured one's domestic life was pressed and ironed, and anything you forgot he was sure to remember.

Yet he also possessed skills most domestic managers lacked. These included scaling buildings, leaping from rooftops and the odd karate chop when required. He wasn’t bad in a crisis either: should you need to board a plane when it was already taxiing
down the runway, Hitch was your man. To Ruby’s mom he was the best darned butler this side of the hemisphere; to Ruby he was a mentor, bodyguard, loyal ally and at times royal pain in the derrière.

The volume Ruby was engrossed in today, however, was neither codebook, textbook, nor true-life story. Today she was reading to relax her brain, a totally necessary pursuit if one wanted to find the answer to something one just couldn’t grasp.

**RULE 6: SOMETIMES NOT THINKING ABOUT A PROBLEM IS THE BEST WAY TO FIND THE SOLUTION.**

And there was a pretty big question that needed answering; what in tarnation was going on in Twinford? Ruby had worked four cases now for Spectrum, and all of them had been resolved, more or less.

But there was something still nagging at her. A sense that those cases were connected somehow, in some way she couldn’t grasp.

She hadn’t got a long way through *Kung Fu Martians* when one of her many phones began to ring. She had a good collection of telephones by now, having become interested in them when she was just five years old: every shape, every design, from a bar of soap to a squirrel in a tuxedo.

She reached for the donut and flipped it open.

‘Twinford Garbage Disposal, we depend on your trash.’

‘Ruby?’
‘Oh, hey Del.’
‘Look, thanks a load Rube, I owe you one, man.’
‘Don’t mention it,’ said Ruby. ‘I mean, who hasn’t jumped into a dumpster to prevent a friend being socked in the kisser?’
‘Most people,’ said Del. ‘Anyway, the thing is, all I’m saying is I appreciate it.’
‘Any time,’ said Ruby. ‘Don’t think me rude, but I oughta get back to reading my comic book; I’m trying to figure something out here.’
‘Go figure,’ said Del.
Del hung up and Ruby went back to her reading until the next interruption, which came from the ACA Insurance Company.
‘Hello ma’am, how are you today, my name’s Doris, I’m calling from the ACA Insurance Company and I would like to invite you to take out an ACA life insurance policy with ACA Life Insurance at half the cost of our usual policy and if you join us today right now over the phone I can throw in an alarm clock radio and a free watch, worth a grand total of fifteen dollars and ninety-nine cents.’
‘Well, thank you for the offer Doris,’ said Ruby, ‘and as good as that sounds, I regret to say I am only thirteen years old and have no dependents depending on my income and no income to speak of, a perfectly good alarm clock radio and a better than ordinary wristwatch, besides which I do not plan to die just yet.’
‘Oh, sorry dear, might I speak to your mother?’
‘She too has a wristwatch and no plans to die.’
‘None of us plan to die, dear.’
‘Believe me, my mom’s not dying, she looks half her age and eats muesli for breakfast – thank you for your call.’

Ruby replaced the phone and resumed her reading, but three minutes later she was interrupted again. This time by Mrs Lemon.

‘Oh Ruby, I’m so glad I caught you, I was just wondering, I mean hoping to goodness, that you might be able to watch baby Archie tomorrow?’

This was not a call Ruby wanted to take, and just how Elaine Lemon had got hold of her private number was a mystery and something she would be taking up with her mother when she came back from wherever she was.

‘Well, jeez Elaine, it’s good of you to think of me but I am up to my eyeballs right now.’
‘Up to your eyeballs in what?’ asked Elaine.
‘This and that,’ said Ruby. ‘I got the girl scouts and band practice and cheerleading, not to mention the Christmas pageant.’

‘Really? Aren’t you a little old for Christmas pageants?’
‘Never too old to join in, Elaine, and I’m a joiner.’

‘It would seem so. My, they do begin these Christmas rehearsals early these days, it’s not even October,’ said Mrs Lemon. ‘Well, Ruby, if you are too busy then I won’t press you and I must applaud your get-involved spirit.’
‘I appreciate that Elaine, I really do,’ said Ruby. Then she hung up and once again went back to her comic. By the time the fourth phone call came in Ruby was a little strung out.

‘What!’ she yelled into the receiver.

‘You OK Ruby? You sound a little tense.’

‘Oh, it’s you Clance, sorry about that,’ said Ruby, relieved to hear the voice of her closest friend and most loyal ally, Clancy Crew, coming back down the line.

‘Yeah, well I’ve had a kinda tense few hours,’ she explained, ‘not what I had planned.’

‘Yeah, I ran into Del, she told me what happened. She was concerned that you might be mad at her,’ said Clancy.

‘Well, I’m not,’ said Ruby.

‘I told her you wouldn’t be,’ said Clancy.

No one knew Ruby like Clancy did, not even Mrs Digby, and she knew Ruby back to front and inside out.

‘So are you worried that Mrs Digby will tell your mom and dad?’

‘What makes you think Mrs Digby knows?’

‘You think she doesn’t?’

‘She knows,’ sighed Ruby. ‘She always knows. Mr Chester rang her, but she has no interest in getting my folks involved. You can imagine how they would react, right?’

Clancy sucked air through his teeth; he knew all right.

‘So what have you been doing?’ asked Ruby.

He let out a weary sigh. ‘I’ve been trying to make this petition
to oppose Mrs Bexenheath’s suggestion that the school lockers be moved from the main corridor to somewhere totally inconvenient.’

‘Yeah, well that’s Mrs Bexenheath all over. Just so long as things are nice and tidy for her then she’s not interested in whether it works for any of us,’ said Ruby.

‘She doesn’t get it. The lockers are more than a place to keep your tennis shoes,’ said Clancy, ‘they are integral to social interaction.’

‘You’re preaching to the choir Clance, it’s Principal Levine you gotta persuade.’

‘I know,’ said Clancy, ‘but I have no idea how.’

‘You’ll think of something,’ said Ruby. ‘I have total faith.’

Pause.

‘So you watching The Ex Detective?’ asked Clancy.

‘I totally forgot it was on this afternoon. What’s the deal?’ asked Ruby.

‘Larry’s got his mom in town, but she’s just been kidnapped.’

‘I didn’t know that Larry had a mom.’

‘No one did,’ said Clancy, ‘but now she’s been kidnapped Larry realises how much he’s been missing her and wishes he hadn’t let the grass grow under their relationship.’

‘It’s always the way,’ sighed Ruby.

‘Yeah,’ agreed Clancy, ‘you just don’t know what you got until it’s gone.’

‘Talking of gone, when exactly are you flying to Washington?’
asked Ruby.

‘In about three weeks,’ said Clancy. ‘My dad’s planning on bringing along the whole pack of us.’

‘So what’s the point of this trip – pleasure or pain?’

Clancy sighed. ‘He won’t tell us, but he said this time we’ll enjoy it. Unlikely, I think. I’ll bet he just wants us to be there looking like a super-happy family. It’s good for politics.’ Clancy’s father was Ambassador Crew and he liked his family to fall in behind him in a nice straight line and generally make him look good. The Crew children struggled with this, partly because they weren’t suited to a life of smiling and waving but mainly because Ambassador Crew was much more focused on himself than he was on them.

‘Jeepers Clance, just how much smiling time has he got you down for?’

‘Forty-eight hours at least,’ said Clancy. ‘I don’t think my jaw will stand it.’

‘You’re pretty resilient, Clance,’ she yawned, ‘you’ll think of something to smile about.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Clancy. ‘Anyway, have you spoken to Hitch since the whole, you know, thing?’ he asked.

Ruby glanced around her as if somewhere in this Twinford teenager’s bedroom something lurked and listened. She was right to be concerned – it wasn’t prudent to talk on an unsecured line. She had learned this the hard way a few months back. Spectrum was not some sort of employment agency, it was a spy agency,
and as anyone knew, spy agencies should not be blabbed about. In fact, blab and you could pack up your spy kit and head on home. It was Spectrum **RULE 1: KEEP IT ZIPPED.** Talking to your best pal Clancy Crew about Spectrum would also bring about a termination of your contract, but then Spectrum weren’t going to know about that since when it came to secrets, Clancy Crew was a vault and though Hitch knew that Clancy knew, he was also a vault.

So you could be pretty certain this secret was well and truly secret.

‘No,’ said Ruby, ‘Hitch hasn’t been around here. He told my folks he’s in the Bahamas with his mother.’

‘I didn’t know he had a mother.’

‘I’m not sure he does.’

‘You think he just made her up?’

‘When it comes to Hitch, I think it’s hard to know what’s true. You **think** you know him but, look at it this way, what do I really have as hard evidence? Do I know anything?’

‘You know he likes coffee,’ suggested Clancy.

‘What I know Clance,’ corrected Ruby, ‘is that Hitch **drinks** coffee and a lot of it, but does he drink it because he likes the taste of it or because he needs to keep from falling asleep? Well, it’s anybody’s guess.’

‘So you wanna meet?’ asked Clancy.

Ruby paused, for a moment torn between the pleasure of chatting to her friend and the pleasure that was reading *Kung*
*Fu Martians.* She sighed. ‘Sure, why not, my day is ruined anyway.’

‘Oh, thanks a bunch, buster.’

‘I didn’t mean it like it sounded,’ said Ruby. ‘Just meant I was planning on a little downtime, but I guess your company might restore my mood.’

‘I’m beginning to think yours might have the entirely opposite effect,’ said Clancy.

‘See you in ten,’ said Ruby.
they met where they usually met when they didn’t want to bump into anyone else – the old oak tree on Amster Green. It was a good spot for hiding coded notes when there were secrets to be passed, and it was also a pretty perfect spot to sit and observe the comings and goings on Amster. The leafy branches provided good cover from passers-by, even this late in the year. October was almost here and most of the leaves still clung to the branches, the colours vivid and varied. It was an exceptional fall due to the late summer and sudden cold snap, the old oak’s leaves turning a whole host of colours.

‘Ideal for leaf peepers,’ said Ruby.

‘What?’ said Clancy.

‘Leaf peepers,’ repeated Ruby, ‘folks who like to spend their free time looking at leaves turning.’

‘There’s a name for people who do that?’ said Clancy. ‘Looking at leaves changing colour has an actual name?’

‘Everything has a name,’ said Ruby. ‘And this is an especially good fall for leaf peeping. It’s due to that Indian summer we
had; I mean, until a few weeks ago the days were pretty sunny, unusually so. We’ve also had some cool evenings and no rain to speak of – as I said, ideal conditions for leaf peepers. It all has to do with sunlight, sugar and sap.’

‘What?’ said Clancy.

‘The green in a leaf is chlorophyll, right? Well, chlorophyll disappears more quickly when the sunlight is bright and the evenings are cool. And dry weather makes more sugar in the cell sap, which accelerates production of red compounds. So: bright days, cool nights and no rain means the green goes fast and lots of red is made to replace it. A leaf peeper’s idea of heaven.’

‘Jeepers, you really retain all this stuff in your actual brain?’

‘You never know when it might come in handy,’ said Ruby.

‘Apart from a biology test, I don’t see this info coming in super handy,’ said Clancy. ‘It’s not knowledge you need to have at your fingertips.’

‘How do you know?’ said Ruby. ‘You never know when a piece of information might prove vital for your future survival.’

‘I think you can be fairly sure this leaf thing isn’t going to help you in a life-or-death situation.’

Ruby knew a lot of facts like this – she spent an awful lot of time looking them up in books. She sometimes even attended lectures on subjects which interested her, slipping in unseen to the Twinford University seminars. The more you know, the more you know was a motto of Ruby’s, and she knew a lot.

Clancy and Ruby were sitting high in the oak’s branches and
looking up at the sky and the dark clouds that were beginning to gather. Was the wind picking up or was there rain coming in?

‘You reckon you could outrun a tornado?’ mused Clancy.

‘No,’ said Ruby.

‘You say that, but I mean could you? I mean, has anyone tried?’

‘I’m sure plenty have tried, but unless they can run at two hundred miles an hour then no, they haven’t succeeded.’

‘Even on a bike?’ asked Clancy.

‘Who can ride a bike at two hundred miles an hour? Who does anything at two hundred miles an hour?’ said Ruby.

Clancy changed the subject. ‘So how are you going to explain climbing into a garbage can?’ he asked.

‘To whom?’

‘Your folks?’

‘How are they gonna find out? Mrs Digby’s sure as darn it not gonna tell ’em.’

‘Yeah, but Mr Chester might.’

‘Oh, so he’s been broadcasting in your neighbourhood as well?’

‘Well, my sister Lulu knew about it. She overheard Mr Chester telling Mr Nori when she walked past the bus stop.’

‘Why doesn’t Mr Chester just get himself a radio station? It would give him wider coverage.’

‘I’m not sure it would,’ said Clancy.

As parents went, Sabina and Brant Redfort were two very
easy-going people, but bad manners and lack of social graces turned them very uptight indeed – especially if these failings were their daughter’s. And getting spotted by the town busybody as you climbed out of a dumpster in front of a poker bar was not socially graceful.

‘Let Mr Chester gossip all he likes,’ said Ruby. She wasn’t concerned; she would figure out exactly what to say. ‘So what was the exciting thing you wanted to tell me?’

‘What do you mean, what exciting thing?’ said Clancy.

‘Come on Clance, it is written all over your face, practically oozing out of the corners of your mouth. I can tell you’ve been dying to tell me something since you got here.’

‘No fooling you, huh?’ said Clancy.

‘I can read you like a book, baby.’

Clancy frowned. ‘Let’s hope a more interesting book than the one about how leaves turn red.’

‘So what’s the news?’

‘I’m going to the Environmental Explorer Awards,’ said Clancy, smiling the smile that he would be wearing on the night.

‘You’re going to that?’ Ruby felt like she might fall off her branch.

Clancy nodded. ‘Yes, I am.’

‘Since when?’ said Ruby.

‘Since my dad had this extra invitation.’

‘How did he manage that?’ asked Ruby.

‘My mom’s not keen on some of the live exhibits.’
‘I guess you got lucky,’ said Ruby.

‘I know,’ said Clancy, ‘it’s this year’s big money-can’t-buy ticket. It must be one of the few perks of being the Ambassador’s favourite son.’ (Clancy was also the ambassador’s only son.)

‘What about your sisters? They not wanna go?’ asked Ruby.

‘Minny’s banned due to some misdemeanour or other, Lulu’s not into that kinda thing, and since I’m the third oldest the others don’t actually get a look in.’

‘I must say, for once I envy you my ambassadorial pal,’ said Ruby.

‘Are your mom and dad going?’ said Clancy.

‘Need you ask?’ said Ruby. The Twinford Environmental Explorer Awards was a three-yearly event held in the Twinford Geographical Institute, a grand modernist building near the Twinford City Museum. A large cheque was presented by a local dignitary to the environmentalist deemed to have made the biggest impact on some area of world ecology. It was a big deal event. Of course the Redfort’s were going. Ruby’s parents were Twinford’s premiere socialites, attending on average two major functions per week along with a sprinkling of private parties, launches and fundraisers.

‘You couldn’t, like, wrestle a ticket?’ asked Clancy.

‘It’s a sell out,’ said Ruby, ‘everyone wants to be there. I guess I will be left watching it on TV.’

‘It’s because of the exhibits,’ said Clancy, ‘that’s what makes it so popular. They said there’s going to be moon rock there and
probably one or two astronauts floating around.’

‘If you get to speak to one of them you gotta ask, which is the more comfortable space suit: the G4C, or the A7L?’ Ruby thought for a moment and then added, ‘Also, does the moon really smell like wet gunpowder?’

Clancy said, ‘I’m going to ask them how they can sit in a rotating spacecraft without getting dizzy? I mean my sister Nancy would puke all the way to the moon.’

‘Which isn’t saying a lot since your sister Nancy looks like she’s about to puke every time she climbs aboard the school bus. No, the real question to ask is – “Aren’t you concerned about all that space junk you’re littering the galaxy with? Sooner or later someone’s going to bump into a lump of it...” – that’s what I wanna know,’ said Ruby. ‘That and what Virgil Hipkip does in his spare time.’

‘Can you even imagine?’ mused Clancy. ‘I mean how does a guy like that relax?’

‘Ah, he probably knits,’ said Ruby.

Virgil Hipkip was a survivalist and explorer of hostile terrain, and known for many hair-raising feats, but the most notorious was when he swam beneath the Arctic ice with a polar bear.

‘He’s the reason my mom doesn’t want to go,’ said Clancy. ‘She thinks he may have insisted that jungle grubs be served as canapés.’

‘A not entirely unreasonable worry,’ said Ruby.

‘I’m hoping to meet him,’ said Clancy. ‘As they say, he hangs out with the rare and dangerous, or is it the dangerously rare?’
‘Well, talking of dangerously rare, if you get a chance, ask him if he’s run into the Blue Alaskan wolf recently – I’ll betcha he hasn’t.’

‘Yep, we must be the only two kids alive today who have seen that old wolf,’ said Clancy. They were talking about a creature thought to be extinct until August that year. Ruby and Clancy had cut it loose. Had they left it caged up there on Wolf Paw Mountain where Lorelei von Leyden and the mysterious Australian woman she was working for had trapped it, then its fate might very well have been the same as that of the dodo.

‘So who do you figure is going to get the big cheque?’ asked Ruby.

‘My money’s on the woman who discovered that new snake species.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘I don’t know, just a hunch,’ said Clancy. ‘I just got a good feeling about her. It’s the sort of discovery that takes a hold on people’s imaginations.’

‘That’s because people are scared of snakes,’ said Ruby. ‘People like to be thrilled.’

‘True, but more than that, this snake has an amazing yellow skin, I mean, fluorescent yellow,’ said Clancy. ‘On top of that, it has a really weird venom, interesting weird.’

‘What does it do?’ said Ruby.

‘Well, it doesn’t kill you,’ said Clancy. ‘At least, not immediately. First of all you sweat, like a lot. I mean you basically sweat to
death unless you drink about a gallon of water; if you don’t, you end up like a raisin. The worst of it is, you find you can’t close your eyes – they are sort of pinned open, which is very unattractive and unrelaxing.’

‘You think you would be able to relax with symptoms like those?’ asked Ruby.

‘It also gives you really bad breath,’ added Clancy.

‘Gross. How come you know all these reptile facts?’ asked Ruby.

‘My dad was given the literature on account of him being on the award’s committee. I read up on it. It’s top secret though; I shouldn’t even be telling you,’ said Clancy. ‘I hope you’re not going to blab.’

Ruby rolled her eyes. ‘Give me a break.’ Hearing about the snake made her wish more than ever that she could make it to the Explorer Awards; snakes were of particular interest to her.

She had spent an awful lot of her time watching the nature channel and had seen more than a few programmes about deadly snakes and their habitats. It was a subject that fascinated both her and Clancy, and one that they had often argued about.

They were always trying to figure out which was the most deadly snake of all. Clancy would usually argue: ‘It has to be the hook-nosed sea krait because it requires the least venom to kill.’

‘Come on, it has got to be the Russell’s viper,’ Ruby would answer. ‘I mean, it has to be considered the more dangerous
on account of it being a more aggressive reptile and it packs more venom. You also have to consider that you are much more likely to cross paths with a Russell’s viper than our hook-nosed friend.’

Clancy refused to accept this argument and merely countered that this was not the point – if one happened to meet the *Enhydrina schistosa* then the chances of making it back to the beach to enjoy a little more sunbathing activity were pretty much non-existent. This argument had been going on for the past five and a quarter years and a compromise had yet to be found. What they both did agree on was: ‘Whichever one you meet, just be sure you don’t upset it.’

‘This snake lady,’ said Ruby, ‘what’s her name?’

Amarjargel Oidov? Or as they say in Outer Mongolia, Oidov Amarjargel.’

‘That’s where the snake’s from? Outer Mongolia?’

‘No, that’s where she’s from. I don’t know where the snake’s from,’ said Clancy. ‘It sounds cool, doesn’t it?’

‘What, the snake?’

‘Outer Mongolia. I mean, how many countries are called ‘outer’ whatever?’

‘You mean like outer space?’

‘Yeah sorta, just makes it sound exciting, kinda wild,’ said Clancy.

‘Speaking of outer space, my money’s on the Mars exploration,’ said Ruby. ‘I mean, what could be more exciting than the big
question... is anyone out there?’

‘...And will they infiltrate human society?’

‘Well, if they are and they do then please let them be on the side of wholesome good-citizen-like behaviour because we already have more than enough bad guys mooching around, most of them in Twinford, as far as I can tell.’

The face of the Count loomed up in her mind’s eye – she could see him laughing, his dark eyes unfathomable. He’d been involved in more than one of the cases Ruby had worked on. Did he have further plans to bring his deadly ambitions to town? She had a bad feeling that all of the cases she’d solved so far were only building up to something bigger. Something infinitely deeper and darker than her worst nightmares could conjure.

She shook her head, trying to dislodge the image, and said, ‘Boy, if I could just get my hands on one of those Explorer tickets.’

‘You’d be lucky,’ said Clancy. ‘My dad said people are ready to commit murder for them.’

And Ruby could almost hear the Count laugh.