

GARGOYLES

SKYLIGHTS AND
ROOFSCAPES

Colin Campbell



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Dedication

For my daughter, Ann,
who was already grown up when I wrote this,
but will always be my little girl.

Chapter One

The worst thing about being a gargoyle, Gordon often thought, was the petrol fumes and the pigeon droppings. Being afraid of heights didn't help much either, something his friend Randolph would never understand, and now that he thought about it, being known as Gordon the Gargoyle was a bummer too. How could his elders, knowing that he was a gargoyle, stick him with a moniker like that? It was worse than being called "A Boy Named Sue". At least that could provoke him into early manhood, but Gordon the Gargoyle?

He struck a match on his elbow and lit a cigarette, another sign of his rebellious coming of age, and the resulting cough rattled his fillings. The Polyfiller reminded him of the scrapes he'd been in over the years; a chipped tooth when he'd tumbled into the skip behind WH Smiths, and a cracked knee when the chimneypot he'd been climbing proved less stable than the relationship between Randolph and that girl from Sun-Tan-Fast-ic.

Erasmus tut-tutted every time the youngster fell foul of gravity, vowing to disown him altogether, but the town elder clung to the hope that once Gordon reached a hundred and fifty he would grow up. Gordon knew better. His adventurous spirit was ingrained deeper than the marble flash across his face that made him look more distinguished than he actually was. For a relatively young gargoyle he looked

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weathered beyond his years. Then there were the pigeon droppings of course. That would age an amoeba.

Gordon looked across the roofscape and noted a hundred chimneys he still hadn't climbed, and a thousand windows he still hadn't looked through. The sun had gone to bed over an hour ago and he took a drag on the cigarette, provoking a second bout of coughing. It would soon be safe to pester Tadpole into a little night surfing, if he could get the fat lump of lard to move his butt off the plinth where he'd happily spend the rest of his life.

Kendal Castle stood out against the rolling hills of the eastern horizon and Gordon gauged the time by its fading presence. There were no streetlights up there to spoil the night, tainting it with the orange glow that the town centre had to endure, and it was the litmus test of nightfall. The bewitching time when gargoyles could stretch their legs – and wings if they had them – and venture abroad. It was all right for the likes of Tadpole, who had a splendid view across Market Place, or Randolph whose perch above Websters Yard took in Castle Howe and the Brewery Arts Centre. All Gordon had to look at was the back of the Bus Station and the top of The Westmorland Shopping Centre. Urgh. Not a carved precipice or corniced rooftop in sight. *“Who would want to live on a roof like this?”* Not Lloyd Grossman that was for sure.

Gordon finished his cigarette, wondering how long he'd have to smoke the damn things in order to grow up, then flicked it expertly into the wheely bin in the yard below. Three weeks ago he'd sparked a minor inferno when the smouldering butt had set the rubbish on fire and he'd been grounded for a week when Erasmus found out. The police spent two days searching for the phantom arsonist and finally put it down to children. Humans always did that. If they couldn't find the culprit, blame the children. It was like blaming the dog for all those granny farts in the lounge. No

fire this time though, just a shower of sparks and a puff of smoke then nothing.

Gordon knew he'd have his work cut out getting Tadpole moving tonight and considered calling for Randolph first, then he remembered it was late-night tanning at Tan-Fast-ic so he'd be busy spying on Gwyneth or Gwen or whatever name he'd given the shapely brunette who worked there. Every Thursday and Friday they opened late and she took advantage of the facilities for a topless top-up after work, maintaining her coffee-coloured complexion in tanning booth three, right under the skylight. Randy was fifty years older than Gordon and had discovered girls last summer. Unfortunately although there were female gargoyles their warts and pointy ears did nothing for their sex appeal and their lumpy figures were the kiss of death to the adolescent male. Randolph found his kicks on Route Sixty-Six. That meant the skylight above the tanning booth. Gordon hadn't yet been smitten by the female form and still found his excitement in the exploration of the world around him.

Tonight that was The Devil's Tower, and he decided not to tell Tadpole until they were almost there. No point giving him extra ammunition for staying put. Gordon had been calling him Tadpole for so long he couldn't remember what his given name was, but since one of these days his legs would probably drop off through lack of use, Tadpole seemed more than fitting. Whether he had the pluck required to explore the Legend of Roman Krol wasn't in doubt – he definitely hadn't – so the trick was to get him moving with the promise of the thing he loved most. Food.

Now gargoyles might be made of stone but they do have feelings, and surviving on a diet of spit-roast pigeons – of which there was no shortage on the rooftops of Kendal – might suit some, but not Fat Boy Slim. For him the true test of the palate was Kendal's other claim to fame, Kendal Mint Cake. That, or fudge, or chocolate, or any confectionery delivered overnight to the back doors of Galabarrow and

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Kirkland Confectioners. So, the cobbled alleyway of New Shambles was the diversion for tonight. He'd reveal their true destination after they'd eaten.

Gordon checked the wheely bin one last time for smoke and suddenly his head began to spin. *Oh sugar and spice, don't look down.* The nightscape swooped and dived and he grabbed hold of the flagpole to prevent himself toppling off his perch. He told himself for the hundredth time to concentrate on the world around him and not below, cursing the embarrassment of being the only gargoyle in Kendal who was afraid of heights. It was a real drawback to being an intrepid explorer when you had to fight back the nausea of the accredited acrophobe. Finally the world settled down and he moved across the shopping centre roof towards Market Place.

*

"Absolutely not," Tadpole said through a mouthful of fudge.

"Ah come on, it's not far. And you need the exercise to work off the chocolates."

They were sitting in the V of the rooftop above New Shambles, the rising moon blotted out by a three-stack chimney. The slate tiles of the facing roof shone pale blue in the moonlight and a waft of smoke drifted from the chimney, untroubled in the still night air.

"Doh, doh, doh," Tadpole said, unable to get his tongue round the consonants as fudge clogged the roof of his mouth. His breath smelled of mint, a testament to the five pieces of Kendal Mint Cake that preceded the fudge. Screwed-up sweet wrappers formed a snowy bed at the bottom of the V and there were more to come. Tadpole unwrapped another piece of vanilla and walnut, and was about to pop it in his mouth when Gordon's hand whipped out, grabbing his friend's wrist. "How can you pass up the chance to uncover a legend?"

“I am not going to The Devil’s Tower and that’s final.”

“Scared of the stories?”

“Not listening.”

“Of Roman Krol?”

“There is no Roman Krol. He’s just a myth. Now let go of my wrist, I’m hungry.”

Gordon twisted his left foot sideways and limped back and forth along the V, dragging his foot. His voice parodied a grizzled narrator. “The best thing Roman Krol did was convince the world he didn’t exist. They say that a young gargoyle crossed him over a hundred years ago and he waited for him one cold dark night. When he got home Krol had his family crushed in one arm and forced him to decide who to kill first. When he didn’t answer, Krol killed them all then broke the gargoyle’s back. He sent him back across the roofscape as a warning to the rest of us. Never cross Roman Krol.”

“I’ve told you, there is no Roman Krol.” Tadpole seemed less confident this time.

“I don’t believe in God,” Gordon said, warming to his speech, “but I’m afraid of him. Erasmus believes in God, but the only person he’s afraid of is Roman Krol.” Even the smoke stopped drifting, engrossed in Gordon’s story. “Without a doubt the best thing Roman Krol did was convince the world he didn’t exist.”

“THERE IS NO KEYSER SOZE,” Tadpole shouted, then they both burst out laughing. The Usual Suspects had blared out of the TV shop skylight two weeks ago and all three friends had listened with rapt attention. Gordon was the film fan but as with most things if he wanted to do it the others generally followed. He was that kind of gargoyle. “Maybe not,” he said. “But there is a Roman Krol and I’m going to find him.”

“Are you sure you want to find him? What about the stories?”

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“You shouldn’t believe everything you read in the papers.”

“Papers? What you talkin’ about?”

“Never mind. Tonight’s the night. I can feel it in my stones.”

Tadpole wasn’t too sure but once again he was swayed by the sheer enthusiasm of his friend. “Can we get some more fudge for on the way?”

“Nah. Leave it here. It’ll give you something to look forward to on the way back. Come on.” He straightened his legs and scaled the slope, grabbing the chimney for balance. From the top he could see right across the jagged roofscape, all peeks and troughs and sharp edges. It was a view he found endlessly fascinating, every roof different and every window a picture frame into another world. Deep shadows and diamond-blue light cut across the picture, hiding a thousand pitfalls and highlighting the rooftops. It was a jungle of twisted fire escapes and rusting TV aerials, and the sheer variety of roof styles continued to fascinate him. This was a world hidden from the people below, the daytimers who spent their lives darting from shop to shop with barely a nod to the world above their heads. The people Gordon sometimes pitied and sometimes envied.

Tadpole joined him beside the chimney. Night was in control now, only the moonlight encroaching on the cold damp slates of Kendal’s rooftops. Orange sodium lights lit the streets below them but little of it spread up here. This was their territory and all around them, in corners and under the eaves, gargoyles were coming to life, waking up. Looking south across Finkle Street towards Highgate they saw what they were looking for, The Devil’s Tower, and began their journey.

*

The Town Hall was an imposing structure, even in the dark, and the cornices and pillars of the clock tower stood out against the night sky. Gordon was careful not to look down, wavering several times as they clambered over the gabled roofs, conscious of his lack of ability and beginning to puff and wheeze. Maybe this smoking lark wasn't such a good idea after all but, hey, you're only young once. Tadpole trundled up behind him; with a centre of gravity as low as his IQ he was more adept at keeping his balance than Gordon, and despite his weight was surprisingly agile. If they ever did The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy in gargoyle he'd get the role hands down.

"I heard he'd been up there so long," Tadpole said, "that he'd eroded away down one side, driving him mad."

"I've heard that as well," Gordon said, excitement shortening his breath. At least he hoped it was excitement. It could always have been the twenty Benson and Hedges he smoked every day. "The gutter broke, spilling water down his face and over the years..." He didn't need to continue; they both knew how bad it was when the rain came. That was a gargoyle's purpose in life after all, supporting the spouts that directed water away from the buildings. If your spout was clogged or broken... urgh. Erasmus had once told them about an old friend who had completely worn away because nobody repaired the gutter. It was tragic and something the old gargoyle hardly ever spoke about. If he'd survived he might be as mad as Roman Krol.

They were approaching from the north, keeping the moon over the clock tower's left shoulder, and having crossed Finkle Street were keeping to the shadows as much as they could. Gordon wished Randolph were here. Tadpole was a good friend but not the sharpest knife in the drawer and sometimes Gordon needed the reassurance of Randolph's added intellect. Those extra fifty years made all the difference, although when he was lusting over Gwyneth or Gwen, or whatever her name was, you'd have to wonder

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about that. Even gargoyles could be lead by the trousers once they'd caught the bug. Gordon intended to put that off as long as possible. This was far more exciting than a topless tanning session.

Following the gully due east they were moving away from the Tower while keeping out of sight. This zigzagging almost doubled the distance but the nearer they got the more that seemed sensible. Roman Krol might just be a gargoyle myth perpetuated to keep the young ones in line, but there was no point pushing your luck. Just in case there really was something up there. Gordon knew from bitter experience that there was no smoke without fire, and if he could accidentally torch a skip behind WH Smiths, then who knew what a gargoyle legend could torch, even if it wasn't Roman Krol?

"Did you hear that?" Tadpole was staring wide-eyed to his right.

"What?" Gordon was as jumpy as Zebedee.

"I think it came from Highgate."

"What did?" Gordon strained his eyes in the gloom. The trouble with keeping out of sight is you couldn't see a damn thing. An army of rats with pointy sticks could be stalking them and they wouldn't know anything about it until the first one prodded you up the jacksy. Then Gordon heard it as well. A clattering noise just over the peak. Pebbles? Loose cement? Maybe, but what was disturbing it? Tadpole's eyes bugged out of his head until they looked like two Cadbury's cream eggs with the heads lopped off. "Roman Krol," he said.

"Don't be daft. The Tower's over there." Gordon gestured southwest.

"Doesn't mean he has to stay there."

"Course he does. That's his place."

"Your place is over the bus station. You're not there."

"Oh shut up, you fillet-of-fish." Now he really wished Randolph were with them. A sensible answer was all he needed, preferably one that didn't feature the name Roman

Krol. Why couldn't he have done this another night, when Tan-Fast-ic was closed? He wanted to light a cigarette but the flare would be a dead giveaway. The clattering again.

"Oh sugar and spice."

"Go have a look," Tadpole suggested.

"You have a look." The great adventurer had deserted him for the moment.

"This wasn't my idea."

Tadpole had him there. Planting his feet on the slope he edged his way to the top, trying not to make any noise that would alert the armies of Roman Krol. One step. Two steps. The sharp peak hid the night. Three steps. Four. Halfway up. The tip of The Devil's Tower was visible against the night sky. Five. Six. He grasped the top of the roof and pulled himself up, sticking his head over the top. Bright silver moonlight blinded him for a moment then he looked down. The angle was a shimmering blue-white ski slope but the valley was a deep black pool of shadow. He struggled up, hooking his elbows over the lip. Still nothing. The slope seemed very steep and that familiar dizziness began to creep over him. *Oh no*. He tried not to look down but that's just what he'd been doing for the last two minutes. The roof tilted to one side and his elbows were too far over. This was one of those times when he wished that gargoyles had smaller heads because it overbalanced him and...

"Aaarrrgh..."

Gordon toppled over and skidded down the blue-white slope into the blackness at the bottom. The pool engulfed him and the breath was knocked out of his lungs. For a few seconds there was silence, then the tapping noises started again and the armies of darkness were upon him. Razor sharp teeth ripped at his arms and legs, scraping stone from the intricately carved creases. He slid backwards along the gully, pushing frantically with his legs to get away but he was still submerged beneath the liquid black shadow line. Stars winked down at him and his breath smoked around his head

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in the cold night air. A scream was building in his throat but he was more afraid of alerting Roman Krol than he was of his rattling minions so he brushed them off with shaking hands.

Tadpole's head poked over the ridge high up on the ski slope, his cheeks puffed out with the effort of climbing up. His eyes bulged as he searched the darkness below. There was nothing to see and panic gripped him like a vice, squeezing the heart in his chest so tight he thought he was going to have a seizure. His little gargyle bazooblies shrivelled into acorns between his legs. Beneath the calm black waters he could hear scuffling, and rattling, and pecking, and was certain Gordon was being eaten alive.

"Gordo, are you all right," he shouted, forgetting about The Devil's Tower and the legend of Roman Krol. His friend was in trouble.

"Of course I'm not... ouch... all right... aargh. Gerroff me."

The voice came from the bottom of the V but Tadpole couldn't make out where. Gordon looked up, his back pressed against the restraining wall at the far end. Nowhere to go. He'd pushed himself all the way to the end and there was nothing left to do but fight. He lashed out with his legs, connecting with one set of teeth after another. Pain flared in his left arm and his head ached. Thank God they'd missed his eyes. He was getting swamped by tiny beasts and felt himself sinking under the onslaught.

Then Tadpole played his trump card. Holding onto the roof with one hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out a cellophane wrapped square of mint cake. Fighting back the whimper in his throat he fired it into the blackness then reloaded and fired again. A rain of mint cake raked the gully and the army took flight. Literally. Flapping wings sounded all around Gordon as the pigeons dispersed. He cursed under his breath and the relief at not being eaten alive by the slaves of Roman Krol forced him to laugh. He sat up, his oversized head emerging from the pool of shadow and fired a volley of

his own. "Pigeons. Come back 'ere ya feathered ferneys. Spit-roast for you when I get hold of ya. Spit-roast and barbecue sauce." He waved a fist at the departing birds and laughed until his sides ached. The pain in his arm was forgotten, and the legend of Roman Krol was forgotten, but one thing wasn't. Not by Tadpole anyway.

"Gordo," he said as he slid down the roof to join him. "Pick the sweets up will you?" The absurdity of that set Gordon off again and he wondered if laughing could kill you. Tadpole was too busy ferreting beneath the shadowline for his beloved Kendal Mint Cake to notice.

All pretence at stalking quietly in the lea of The Devil's Tower had vanished and Gordon's laughter could have brought a blind man home. What it did bring was something far worse. While his eyes wept and his ears echoed with his own laughter he didn't see the shadow forming on the blue-white slope of the roof tiles. It surged out of the pool like the Kraken awakening, surging up from the deep black depths. Enormous wings spread from its sides as it transformed from a shadow into a gigantic monster. The head alone was the size of Tadpole and the shoulders were muscled stone. Arms like tree trunks unfurled then wicked talons flashed out as the hands reached their full span. They hadn't found Roman Krol. Roman Krol had found them.

Tadpole saw it and jerked upright, all thought of finding his sweets forgotten. Gordon's laughter was drying up but it was the voice of doom that snapped him out of it. "WHO GOES THERE IN THE SHADOW OF MY KINGDOM?" it boomed, echoing across the rooftops like a battery of cannon.

Tadpole's bazooblies, which had already shrivelled to next to nothing, disappeared altogether and Gordon's quickly followed suit. He almost answered before he realised it was a rhetorical question. Krol was going to eat them anyway, no matter who they were.

"WHO GOES THERE I SAY?"

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Tadpole farted. A noisy two-tone ripper that betrayed his fear.

“I RECOGNISE THAT FART,” the voice said. “IT IS THE FART OF A BIG GUN. A DOUBLE BUTTOCKED SHOT FROM THE TADPOLE OF FINKLE STREET.”

“Market Place,” Tadpole said before he realised who he was contradicting.

“I KNOW WHERE you live...” The voice changed, becoming less imposing, then burst into childish laughter. The shadow disappeared and Randolph stuck his head over the far peak. “And I know what you’re doing,” he said sliding down the join them.

“Careful,” Tadpole said. “You’ll squash my sweets.” He was searching the shadows again even before Gordon thumped Randolph on the arm. “You fiddle headed ferney. Scared me to death.” There was no anger in his voice though, laughter once again crawling up his throat. They were together again and that felt good. Now it was time for Roman Krol.

*

The laughter had dried up by the time they reached the foot of The Devil’s Tower. The town hall might look imposing during the day but that was nothing compared to the presence you felt when it was up close and personal by the light of the moon. They kept to the shadow side and crouched in the last gully like soldiers waiting to go over the top. The final assault on a long forgotten battlefield. Tan-Fast-ic had closed early tonight so Gordon was flanked by both of his friends and their presence gave him fresh courage. The adventurer returned.

“You do realise this is nonsense don’t you?” Randolph said.

“What is?” Gordon said.

Tadpole was too busy stuffing his face again; his own personal fear, fight or flight mechanism. A trail of sweet wrappers led all the way across the battleground so at least if they had to flee they would know which way to go. That wasn't a plan though, he was just an untidy cod.

"The Legend of Roman Krol. It is simply a story to keep you children away from the clock tower." Randolph considered himself to be beyond childhood, as his infatuation with Gwen proved. The red-blooded young male had more important things to do than play these silly games.

"Watch who you're calling a child," Gordon said, stung by the criticism. Tadpole wasn't bothered. They could call him anything they wanted so long as he had his mint cake. "Want a cig?" He produced his badge of office. Children don't smoke.

"No thank you. Unless you want Roman to see you."

"Thought you said he was nonsense?" Gordon said, scoring a point.

Randolph didn't answer, his armour dented. You could put on all the brave faces you wanted but being this close to the domain of a legend made you pause.

"Anyway," Gordon continued. "If the Legend of Roman Krol was invented to keep us away, there must be something here they don't want us to see." Randolph couldn't argue with that but the question remained; what was it? He turned his back on the tower and leaned against the wall of the gully. "And what do you think that is?"

"The Golden Clock Bell?" Gordon answered. "Hidden treasure? Who knows?"

"A chest of Kendal Mint Cake," Tadpole said. "The original recipe kept secret for centuries." Now that would be something worth finding. Gordon looked down his nose at him then glanced at Randolph. "The shower of Aphrodite? Maybe Gwen could use it." Randolph dug him in the ribs. "Never poke fun at the travails of the heart." He spun round and looked up at the chiselled bulk of The Devil's Tower.

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“What if the legend was invented to protect us from our own curiosity? What if something worse than Roman Krol lives there?”

That didn't wash with Gordon. Especially now he had rediscovered the explorer in him. The fear of the unknown never even entered his head, only excitement at searching for it. He couldn't imagine anything more terrible than Roman Krol so if Randolph thought it was a fabrication that would do for him. He looked at the gigantic silhouette fringed by flashes of moonlight, and saw only possibilities. Randolph regressed a notch, not quite as grown up as he liked to think. He might be the thinker of the group but Gordon was definitely the leader.

“Let's find out shall we?” he said, climbing out of the gully. Tadpole put his sweets away and followed, sure footed as ever, and Randolph joined them on the carved plinth at the base of the tower. In the pitch-black shadows above the eastern clock-face a pair of slanted eyes blinked once then followed their progress.

*

Don't look down, don't look down, Gordon told himself as they reached the cracked white face of the clock. It was a blessing that they were scaling the mountain by the eastern route, because this side of the tower was in darkness, and that meant the drop beneath his feet was in darkness as well. To be honest he was finding the climb easier than he'd expected because, unlike the other buildings that made up the Auld Grey Town of Kendal, the town hall was a wedding cake of easy-to-scale tiers.

A rattle and bang sounded behind him and his eyes snapped round.

“Damn,” Tadpole said. “That's another two I've lost.”

“Should have got that crack in your pocket sewn up,” Randolph said.

“Should have got that crack in your mouth sewn up,” Gordon added.

“Should have got that hole in your assky sewn up,” Tadpole retorted.

Gordon scanned the route ahead, a feeling of unease bristling the hairs at the back of his neck. He could sense the pressure building inside him like the time he'd climbed the rooftop generator behind the shopping centre. Charged air hovered around the generator like its own personal storm-front and he could feel the static in his stones now. It was nothing to do with his fear of heights. This was something else, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

“Come on Indiana Jones,” Randolph said. “You're holding up the traffic.”

Gordon looked back at his friend and for a moment thought about calling it a day. They'd explored the fringes of Roman Krol's kingdom; perhaps they should leave the rest for another day. He knew he couldn't do that though. He'd dragged his friends this far and couldn't just drop it here. Tadpole would never forgive him for losing those sweets for a start. Another glance at the clock-face then he sidled left along the ledge. The easiest way ahead was round the corner and climb the intricate carvings that ran up each corner. There were roses, and angels, and twists of vine, and the entire thing formed a convenient ladder to the stars. The angels were female and naked so no doubt Randolph would thank him later.

Gordon went first, one step at a time as he crept round the corner holding tight onto the stone vine. Moonlight painted the stonework with its cold white brush, spilling black ink into the corners. The shadows were darker and sharper and infinitely more dangerous. He half expected another one of those pesky pigeons to burst out of a crack like in all those John Woo films. He tried to bolster his courage with a suitable quote from the films he loved but nothing came. Maybe even John Wayne would have trouble up here without

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his scriptwriter. No, “*a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do*”, without the silver pen of William Goldman or whoever it was.

One hand grasped a vine then his foot stood on a rose and he pulled himself up. The other hand, then another rose. Pull himself up. Hand and vine and foot and rose, then pull. He was so intent on the routine of climbing that he didn’t notice the slight movement just above him and by the time he did it was too late. Randolph was right behind him and Tadpole a short way down. Gordon climbed on, his hands and feet becoming linked in a waltz of upward movement. One two three, one two three. Hands feet pull, hands feet...

His next handhold came away from the wall and Gordon jerked backwards into the cold night air. He expected to hear the clack clack bang of a piece of falling masonry as his heart jumped into his mouth but what he saw was far worse. The scream came in a stuttering voice that fooled his friends for a second, then they too saw what loomed above them. Tadpole was back round the corner and onto the ledge before Gordon found another grip and Randolph yelled for him to follow as the twisted bulk of Roman Krol uncoiled itself from the vines and angels.

“Gerrou of ’ere,” Gordon screamed over his shoulder.

Huge slanted eyes blinked once then the monster surged forward. Gordon threw himself onto the ledge as claw hammer talons sliced the air in front of his face. Stone chips exploded from the ancient monument then another blow knocked a rose from its niche. The angels looked down in horror and Randolph forgot about their nakedness. Kendal Mint Cake was the last thing on Tadpole’s mind as he flew down the clock tower like a gargoyle half his size. No sign of his legs dropping off tonight. Gordon fought a rearguard action, dodging blows as his friends got clear.

Fear burned his throat but in the heat of battle he became curiously detached, performing movements a ballet dancer would be proud of. The great melted head jutted forward,

white fire sparking off teeth the length of Gordon's arm, and he was thankful when he was round the corner and in the shadows. Krol slammed down onto the ledge but in the dark his disgusting ugliness wasn't as fearsome, only the fact that you couldn't see what he was doing. The mouth opened and blasted out a roar that almost blew Gordon off the ledge. Garbage pale breath stung his nostrils and he wished he had smaller ones like the human's he'd watched from his perch.

Gordon dropped from the ledge, grabbed for the handhold he'd used coming up... and missed. The world became a vacuum, sucking him down, and the swirling vortex whopped his stomach up to his chin. Got it. One hand clamped onto the trefoil and broke his fall while overhead the imposing bulk of Roman Krol jutted over the edge. Gordon hung there for a moment, easy pickings for the monster of Devil's Tower, then the ogre pulled back and disappeared round the corner.

The laughter had already started by the time he reached the safety of the gully, Randolph and Tadpole crying their relief with belly aching guffaws. Soon Gordon joined them, vowing never to upset Roman Krol again. It was a promise he would be unable to keep.

Chapter Two

Three days later Gordon sat on his perch above Dr Manning's Yard and looked out onto Highgate. It was a sunny afternoon and the autumn leaves across the road at Castle Howe were burnished red and ochre while the hills of Cunswick Scar in the distance stood out proud and green against the pale blue sky. Actually this wasn't Gordon's perch at all; another sign of his rebellious nature, and the gutter he supported was normally free standing, not requiring a gargoyle at all. Erasmus always delighted in telling the youngsters that gargoyle came from the French *gargouille* meaning throat, and *to gargle*, which Gordon felt like doing every time Erasmus brought the subject up.

What the council elder remarked on most of all just lately was the importance of knowing your place, not only in the grand scheme of things but which water spout you were meant to be supporting. That was usually aimed at Gordon who had taken to switch hitting over the past few months, alternating his daytime resting place to add variety to everyday life. And get a better look at the humans he was growing more curious about.

Being afraid of heights was a serious drawback in this pursuit, and the uninterrupted view afforded during daylight hours made it even more difficult. Sometimes he had to fight back waves of dizziness, hanging onto the spout he was supposed to protect for grim death, and it was only his innate

curiosity that forced him on. The skylights and roofscapes of his world paled into insignificance against the multifarious layers of the ground-dwellers, and he watched them with a keenness he never showed for his gargoyle studies. His constant changes of position didn't worry him as much as they worried Erasmus because who would notice? From what he'd seen so far everyone rushed from shop to shop in a dizzying waltz, never looking up except to check on the weather or dodge an attack of the pigeon droppings.

The boy was different though. He could see, Gordon was certain of it, and he was looking up at him now. During his hundred and fifty years on the rooftops of Kendal he had only encountered a handful of roof watchers, most of them staring skywards on the pedestrian precinct of Market Place, and several of them being as mad as a sack of badgers. One dark-skinned man, whose clothes betrayed either a lack of personal hygiene or a shortage of cash, stared at the sky from dawn 'til dusk every day for a month. He was so regular that by the end other people glanced up as they passed to see what he was looking at. There was nothing there of course, but Gordon knew better. The gargoyles were there. Had he noticed movement among the stone guardians of the waterspout? Maybe. The boy definitely did.

Gordon looked down at the fair-haired child and wondered what he was thinking about. Pale blue eyes beneath whitewashed brows stared implacably at the position Gordon occupied and they didn't seem to blink. That stare went right through him and Gordon stared back. Nobody could outstare a gargoyle but the lad was giving him a run for his money. The young gargoyle tried to guess his age but he'd never been very good at that. Those bags of flesh and bone seemed to age so quickly, beginning to sag and wrinkle almost before his very eyes. It was only their behaviour that betrayed their stage in life. Youthful enthusiasm for all things new, and boundless energy, denoted Phase One, followed by a more studied pose of the adult human. Finally the youthful

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enthusiasm returned but without the boundless energy. Gordon reckoned if they could master the art of retaining their enthusiasm they'd be a lot happier, something most of them most definitely were not.

The boy was still at the youthful enthusiasm stage but without the wrinkles so he guessed he was still fairly young, maybe a hundred or so, and that made Gordon want to meet him all the more. Erasmus wouldn't understand, and certainly wouldn't condone it. Gargoyles had their place and that was not at ground level. Being at ground level felt like a good idea to Gordon, and he yearned for the chance to try it. He waited for the boy to turn away, outblinked by the lidless gargoyle, then lit a cigarette. *One of these days*, he thought, unaware that his first encounter with humankind was just around the corner, and it wouldn't be as pleasant as he hoped.

*

Darkness fell on the rooftops of the Auld Grey Town like a pack of hungry wolves, and Gordon welcomed it. At last he could stretch his aching joints and venture abroad. His last cigarette of the day arced towards its target with the precision of a laser guided missile, and plopped squarely in the dumpster outside Horncop and Howard Booksellers. He waited for the customary shower of sparks and wisp of smoke to die, then headed across the rooftops in search of adventure. Tonight he felt like a Lone Ranger kind of evening and left Tonto and his trusty steed Trigger to their fudge and topless tanners. Tadpole and Randolph could have the night off.

It was colder tonight and Gordon reckoned the clear sky would bring a touch of frost, something that would at least keep the pigeons quiet but make movement difficult for the vertically challenged gargoyle. He sometimes wished he had Tadpole's lower centre of gravity and his head for heights but wouldn't trade it for his sense of wonder at all things new. In

that respect he still had that youthful enthusiasm and boundless energy so he supposed he was only slightly older than the boy who watched him every day. In real terms anyway.

The black sawtooth rooftops stretched into the distance, lights from the windows blinking out one by one as the people closed for the day. It never ceased to amaze him just how many different types of window and rooftop there were in such a small town. There were square-jawed sash windows that opened with the help of counterweights in their frames, and side opening frame windows that only needed a nudge. There were arched windows, and louvered windows, and pretty little round windows, and there was the ornate coloured glass of the church windows as well. They were even more attractive than the oriole that stood out on the north wall of Carnegie Library, a place to be avoided at all costs if you were a young gargoyle. It wasn't the accumulated wealth of knowledge you had to be careful of but the nippy-snippers of the miniature winged gargoyles that decorated its eaves.

The skylights fascinated him most of all. Even these took many shapes, from the basic square-cut double-angled skylight to the more ornate carvings of the single opener. These always reminded him of lean-to green houses, and he half expected to see rows of seed potatoes or tomato plants whenever he looked through one. The two men who were looking through the skylight in Stramongate weren't looking for tomatoes though, and the sight of a human in this world of skylights and roofscapes caught Gordon by surprise.

He had just navigated a rounded cupola, with its wrought iron fretwork worn like a rusting crown around its head, when he saw them, and his first instinct was to hide. Then curiosity got the better of him and like many a cat before him it was about to get him into trouble. It was two hours after sunset but the moon hadn't risen yet, and only the reflected glow from the streetlamps below threw any light on the

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rooftop. That didn't seem to bother the men however, because they were crouching beside the skylight with a battered silver torch. A flask sat on the lead flashing beside them, steaming more than their breath in the cold night air. The first signs of frost touched the slates with its icy fingers, tiny diamonds glinting in the starlight.

Diamonds appeared to be on the men's minds as well as they beavered away at the window above Neville Goldenthall Jewellers and Watchmaker. Gordon was fascinated. He'd never seen a burglar before, and was surprised they didn't have black masks and swag bags. He was even more surprised that they spent so much time swigging coffee from the flask. They were in no hurry it seemed.

"...and then they raided the crew's tent for supplies."

"Wasn't that against the rules?"

"Course it was. They were supposed to survive on their own. What's the chuffing point of calling it "Shipwrecked" if they aren't going to survive on their own? You don't think Robinson chuffing Crusoe could raid the crew's camp do you?"

"Only askin' mate. Only askin'."

Both men wore the hard faces of the not-so-young-and-boisterous, but the "Shipwrecked" fan looked older and leaner. He was also short, and displayed all the symptoms of SMS. Small Man's Syndrome. His companion, while being no less tough, seemed willing to placate him for a quiet life.

"Well stop chuffing askin' and pass me the chuffing screwdriver."

"Here ya go." He slapped a twelve-inch flat blade driver into Mr Angry's hand. "What did they do then?"

"Who?"

"The crew? Did they send 'em all home like?"

"Nah. Soft oomphahs. Took their tent off 'em didn't they? Crimea, who's bothered abaht a chuffing tent?"

Wood chewed under the pressure from the screwdriver, and one piece splintered off. Gordon sidled across to the

chimney for a better view. He dislodged a snag of cement and it rattled down into the gully. Both men snapped towards the sound, eyes as hard as flint. These weren't your average breaking-and-entering merchants, these were hard men. Neither spoke, letting their eyes do the talking. Each took a section of roof and quartered it like CCTV cameras. Once satisfied they were alone they went back to work. Gordon began to sweat but the fear excited him, and the close proximity of two bona fide walking people pricked his interest. In a hundred and fifty years he'd never been this close before.

"You sure about the alarm?" Number Two asked.

"Building above his shop is empty. Hasn't got one. When we drop on him in the morning he'll have switched the alarm off to open up."

"What if he screams?" Number Two slid down the hardness scale.

"Then we'll cut his bleedin' legs off. Give him somethin' to scream about." He pulled a jag-toothed saw from the holdall, and Gordon's blood ran cold. Surely these two weren't indicative of the human race? Of all the faces he'd watched over the years none had displayed such a blatant disregard for human life as these two. They were almost as frightening as Roman Krol.

The window splintered a bit more, opening half an inch before it stopped. Number Two pulled a long metal hook from the bag, and Gordon wondered what on earth it was. He'd never seen a crowbar before and was surprised that they made tools especially for burgling. The flat end joined the screwdriver and he was about to put all his weight on it when Gordon leaned too far forward. Three slates popped their rivets and scurried down the roof, and Gordon followed them, sliding on his backside all the way down into the gully. For the second time in three days he found himself attacked by evil beasties with sharp teeth, this time saw teeth.

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Both men jumped up as the tiles crashed into the V. The crowbar came up into attack position and the screwdriver followed. Gordon was conscious of the leg-chopping saw in the bag before the breath was knocked out of him by the fall. He splashed into the pool of blackness at the bottom of the gully and tried to get up. Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee braced themselves for the attack, expecting some over-zealous security guard to emerge from the shadows, and completely unprepared for what they saw.

Starlight glinted off the glass in the window and the orange street lamps spread an evil haze along the edge of the rooftops. It picked out the bullet heads of the two men and sparked fire in their eyes. Number Two swung the torch in a lazy arc towards the gully, the solid white disc of light seeing everything.

Strips of splintered wood stuck out from the edge of the skylight. Two cracked tiles showed up halfway across the sloping roof. A rusty nail held a feather prisoner just above the shadow line. And three broken tiles lay scattered at the bottom of the gully. The beam followed the path of debris, picking out each individual piece like sections of a broken jigsaw puzzle. Then they saw the feet.

For such hard men their reaction was almost comical. They gasped in unison and stepped back, bumping into the skylight. The torch swung up, following the chiselled legs and stubby torso until the beam reflected off a pair of sinister growling eyes. Gordon didn't realise he had sinister growling eyes, and would have laughed if anyone suggested he had, but the sight of such a monster was enough for these two. An over-zealous security guard this was not. The bag was snatched up and they were off faster than a false start at Sandown Park, around the corner and over the ledge like ferrets down a rabbit hole.

Gordon felt relief tinged with sadness, almost calling after them that it was all right for them to stay. His lack of knowledge of the human condition hadn't prepared him for

the difference between good and evil, and he simply missed the opportunity to meet the ground-dwellers in person. The fear quickly evaporated, as it often did with him, and he was sorry to see them go. It might not have been a Close Encounter of the Third Kind, but it did qualify for the Second Kind. Not exactly contact but certainly physical evidence.

Once the shock of disturbing them had gone he began to paw over every detail of the incident, and in a curious way this terrifying encounter was the beginning of all his troubles. It made him more determined than ever to meet the humans first hand, and that meant during the day. Erasmus might well say the grass is always greener on the other side of the hill, but Gordon wanted to see it for himself. As he clambered back across the rooftops a plan began to form, and it involved a pair of pale blue eyes beneath whitewashed brows.

Chapter Three

Billy Rinkfield left Eastview Children's Home at eight thirty, his normal time for going to school, and cut through Castle Howe and the Brewery Arts Centre towards Highgate. Apart from two nurses looking out the back of Westmorland County Hospital, and a park keeper sweeping leaves in the lawned square, nobody saw him go. The home gave him bed and board but the staff there paid him little attention, and he was pretty much left to his own devices. The only time they were concerned was when he got into trouble and the authorities came round; then they did pay him some attention, quite a lot when the police left.

His pale blue eyes beneath snow-white eyebrows scanned the rooftops as he entered the alley, then, satisfied that the little gargoyle hadn't moved to this side of town, he came out onto Highgate. Billy had no intention of going to school today, hadn't been for over a week, and slung the satchel over his shoulder as he planned his day. Operation Skywatch was in full swing, but he still needed to search methodically if he was going to prove anything. And prove it he would.

Yesterday, when he'd found where the gargoyle was perched, he had a strong feeling that the gargoyle was watching him and, despite the fear that engendered, the tingling of anticipation was stronger. Over the last week he had logged three different places where the gargoyle with the distinctive marble flash had been squatting, two of them in

places without a waterspout for him to support. He had read all about gargoyles at the library, and although he didn't understand French he knew what gargle meant, and the whole waterspout theory. None of the texts mentioned them moving around from day to day though. As far as he could find, the statues were set in stone, and as immovable as the soldier's statue at The Great War Memorial in Market Place. The fact that this one seemed to move around town like a lost balloon fascinated him and terrified him at the same time. Gargoyles were ugly beasts after all, and not to be messed with, but Billy sensed a friendliness in this one, perhaps from the smirk at the edges of his mouth.

There were gargoyles all over Kendal, and some very intricate carvings among their rooftop homes. Billy had seen them in passing but, like most people walking the streets of the town centre, kept his eyes mainly at ground level. The first one that pricked his interest was a very studious young gargoyle overlooking the Brewery Arts Centre. It was a lot newer than the ancient carvings near the town hall and looked as if it should be wearing spectacles, its stance reminiscent of the great thinker that was parodied so much as sitting on the toilet with his head resting on one fist. He began to fantasise late at night, when the loneliness of the dormitory bit deepest, playing out different scenarios where the gargoyle was his friend, accompanying him on adventures across the rooftops.

The rooftops were his thing, the dreamworld he most wanted to inhabit. If Gordon's favourite films were westerns, then Billy's were the Batman movies. Not the comic book television series, but the dark and brooding Danny Elfman films. Those films revealed a darkness of character in the twelve-year-old that should not be present in any child his age; at least not any child from a loving home with caring parents. Billy had neither. No, Batman and Spiderman were his heroes, Batman from the films and Spidey from the numerous comics he kept hidden at the foot of his bed. The

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one thing they both had in common was the regular adventures they had in the twilight world of the city's rooftops, a place he yearned to visit.

The intellectual gargoyle had been knocked off Billy's fantasy list when he first encountered the diminutive figure with a flash of white across his head. That flash was reminiscent of Billy's own flash of white, the albino eyebrows that caused him so much trouble at school. Bullies didn't need much prompting, and being able to poke fun at the white caterpillars crawling above his pale blue eyes was too much to miss. Nicknamed Snowy by his peers he had been in numerous playground scuffles that brought unwanted attention to Eastview Children's Home and angered his teachers as well. There weren't too many people queuing up to fight his corner so the imaginary friendship with a marble-flashed gargoyle was the next best thing. First he had to find him though, and today that would take well over an hour.

*

It seemed appropriate that they should meet above the Carnegie Library since that was where Billy learned most of what he knew about gargoyles. He had read everything there was to read in the Illustrated Dictionaries and Encyclopedias of the reference library, but it was a Stephen King book that interested him the most. *Nightmares in the Sky – Gargoyles and Grotesques*, was a collection of photographs with accompanying text by the Horror Master, and it was big. Not so much thick, as tall and wide, and the photographs were gorgeous. Every conceivable gargoyle was in there, from the winged dragons of the gothic era to the quaint toad-like creatures of the northern reaches. Some looked brand new while others had been worn by the passage of time and the power of water. They were terrible and beautiful at the same time.

Turning into Woolpack Yard, Billy scanned the rooftops, beginning to feel frustrated at not having found his friend yet, then circled the huge square building coming round the other side into Library Road. That's where he saw him, the familiar white flash standing out against the dull red and grey brickwork. Once again he was devoid of waterspout, and Billy got the feeling the little fellow preferred it that way.

And he was looking at him, Billy was certain of it.

It was mid morning but the traffic in Stricklandgate still moved past the front of the library in a turgid flow. Library Road on the other hand was quiet. The oversized grey head was bowed in silent prayer and Billy spotted him immediately, crossing the road to get a closer look. Most of the time he had stared from across the street, not wanting to get too near in case he drew attention to himself. He remembered a coloured man who seemed to spend half his life staring at the gable ends of Market Place. People always gave him a wide birth, worried that his madness might brush off on them. Billy didn't want to appear mad although the possibility that he might be entered his head occasionally. After all how many people actively encouraged friendship with a two-foot weather-beaten statue?

He stood beneath the northern rampart of the library and looked up into the tired grey eyes. Eyes as dead as a bag of frogs. Those eyes were identical to every other pair of gargoyle eyes he'd ever looked into. Billy stared, mesmerised, dreaming of friendship and adventures and life on the rooftops of Kendal. He made a mental note of where he had found the gargoyle today, intending to plot a map of his route across the Auld Grey Town. During this entire operation, Marble-Flash was the only gargoyle who had moved, and Billy was pondering that when...

The eyes moved. They glanced towards Stricklandgate, then at the car park, then directly at Billy Rinkfield. Satisfied that he had the young boy's attention the gargoyle nodded towards the back of the library then climbed onto the roof.

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There was one moment of panic when Billy thought he was going to fall off, then the gargoyle was gone. Electricity sparked every nerve in his body, the hair bristling on the back of his neck. He reckoned he must look like a coconut, every hair sticking up like a nut in a shy. His feet were rooted to the spot, unable to move, and his thoughts were going ten to the dozen. In his wildest dreams he'd never thought something like this could happen. He wasn't sure quite what he'd expected, but this... whoah.

Billy got his legs working and staggered round the back of the library. *I'm going round the back to meet a gargoyle... I'm going to meet a gargoyle.* For a moment, as he thought those thoughts, he was certain he'd finally lost his marbles. Having a fantasy was one thing, believing you were going to live it was quite another. The narrow street at the back of the library was dark, a shadowy world where meetings could be had. There were no windows but a twisted metal fire escape led to a faded green door on the top floor. It was as close to the roof as he could reach, and obviously where the gargoyle meant him to go.

With bated breath he began to climb. Gravity conspired against him, weighing his legs down and turning his feet into suckers that clung to the earth. High above he saw the green door but no sign of his friend. *Can I call him that? Is it too early to say I've made a friend?* The answer was yes. Billy was climbing a rusty fire escape to a door with flaking paint, with no prospect, other than his fevered imagination, of meeting anything but an irate librarian. Of course it was too early.

But if there was one thing that enabled him to survive the change from being an adoption prospect to a long-term resident it was his innate optimism. He had no idea where it came from, having never met either his mother or father, but it was there, ingrained in stone. He *would* meet the gargoyle and they *would* become friends. End of story.

The stairs doglegged right and he followed them round, onwards and upwards. The first landing now. Green paint splashes stood out on the risers and he looked at the door. It must have been decades since it was painted, great strips of green paint peeling off like scabs on a leper, yet the splashes seemed as fresh as yesterday. One step at a time. He forced himself to take one step at a time. He could feel the roof getting closer but refused to look up, the potential for disappointment too great, then the green door loomed ahead of him. He was there.

Silence swam over him and he felt dizzy. One shaky hand grabbed the railing for balance and he closed his eyes. Traffic noises below were so distant they could be from another planet. Another world. The world of ground-dwellers not roofscapers. He felt sick with anticipation.

“Are you afraid of heights as well?”

The voice was kind. Billy looked up into the smiling face and began to cry.

*

Later that night Billy returned to the library, his head full of questions and his body full of energy. They had spoken briefly at the top of the fire escape but the little gargoyle said it was too risky during the day and arranged to meet after dark. Billy didn't want to leave, afraid that if this contact were broken he might never make it again, but Gordon – that was the gargoyle's name – insisted. The rest of the day went by in a blur, his body running on motor functions only since his mind was elsewhere. Then it was back to the library.

This time the climb up the twisted metal staircase was less stressful, and once he reached the green door he clambered onto the railing and pulled himself over the lip. The red brick building had a peaked roof with twin gables and an enormous cluster of chimneys at one end. A narrow walkway ran around the gutter to allow workmen access for repairs but

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apart from that it was all slopes and angles. Climbing them was excitement itself. Spiderman would have been proud of him.

Gordon was waiting beside the chimney and for a moment neither could bring themselves to speak. Billy could see that the gargoyle was as excited about this as he was and that added to the occasion. This was a meeting of worlds more significant than ET being chased around LA on a bicycle. They eyed each other up and down in silence, and Billy soaked up every detail of the gargoyle's appearance. He was taller than Billy expected, maybe four feet or more, and built like the proverbial brick out-house. Arms and legs appeared to be hewn from tree trunks – apart from the fact that they were in fact stone – and the head was perched on top of narrow shoulders that seemed completely out of scale. He looked as if he would topple over. Then there was that distinctive marble flash across his face that almost made them blood brothers. It stretched from one pointed ear diagonally across the forehead to somewhere beneath the hairline, except he didn't have hair just a ruffled brow. The hands were claws, but not the threatening vampire talons of myth, and the feet looked just like Billy's. That was the strangest thing, as if whoever carved him wanted to play a joke on the viewing public, a reptilian monster with a human side, the human side being his feet.

“Are you all right here?” Gordon asked. “You looked a bit dizzy earlier.”

Billy found his voice. “I was just a bit... blimey. Are you really a gargoyle?”

“I am.”

“Whoah. Nobody will believe this.”

“You can't tell anyone. Not yet. I... don't know... Well, I am very glad to meet you, but we need to talk about what to do about this.”

“Yes. Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't mean... Actually I have nobody to tell anyway.”

“What about your family?” Gordon was curious.

Billy looked away. “Don’t have any.”

“Really?” This was new to Gordon who didn’t understand the evolution of the human race. “Me neither. I mean, I was carved you know, so we don’t have any family really. I didn’t know humans were the same. Who made you then?”

“I wasn’t made, I was born.” The boy was defiant and sad at the same time. “And I do have a mother and father, they just didn’t want me so they put me in a home.” His jaw clenched and his nostrils flared, and Gordon saw a wound that was deeper than any physical hurt.

“I don’t have anyone either. Not family anyway. There’s Randolph and Tadpole, they’re my best friends, and old Erasmus is like a father sort of, but I’m on my own as well.” He looked into the boy’s eyes and saw them soften a touch. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?” He had heard children talk of such things at the shopping centre, not fully understanding what they were except they were obviously family.

“Don’t think so.”

“You don’t know?”

“First thing I can remember is being sent back to the home by a family that didn’t like me. They had other kids but... I don’t remember any brothers or sisters. Care workers never mentioned any either.”

“Well, I like you,” Gordon said.

Billy was touched and couldn’t speak for a moment. The gargoyle’s head tilted to one side as he examined Billy’s face. A pointed finger reached out and brushed his snow-white eyebrows then his own marble flash.

“If you had pointed ears we could almost be brothers.”

Billy laughed then touched Gordon’s feet.

“We’ve got the same feet though.”

The gargoyle recoiled, stifling a giggle.

“No, no... don’t.”

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Billy touched them again and the gargoyle practically jumped off the roof.

“Are you ticklish?”

He tickled the curled toes again. The protests became screams of laughter and Gordon backed away. Billy laughed as well, tickling them again.

“Aargh ha ha ha...”

They both rolled around the V between the rooftops and laughed until their sides ached. In between streams of tears Billy managed to speak.

“I’ll be your brother if you like.”

“I’d like that very much.”

And that was settled.

*

The rest of the night was magical. In the past, Billy had clambered about on the fire escape at Eastview, and even ventured into the V between the twin gables, but nothing like this. The rooftops of Kendal were a mythical kingdom, completely separate from the streets below, and they seemed to stretch forever. Looking across the roofscape was like viewing another planet, the Moon, or Venus, or somewhere like that. It was full of craters, and mountains, and strange, strange windows, and it was beautiful beyond imagination.

First they climbed over the District Council Offices beside the library, and the variety of chimneystacks was staggering. A whole cluster of terracotta pots stood proud on their heavy stone chimney, round ones, and square ones, and fancy patterned ones that Billy had never seen before. He couldn’t understand why they were so different, they only belched smoke after all, but Gordon explained that whoever made them also carved the gargoyles and would likely be bored if he made them all the same. Also some chimney pots belched more smoke than others and needed the fluting around the edge to displace it.

Standing on the peak of the northeast gable, Gordon gestured across the entire town. Kendal had never looked so good, and from here you could be forgiven for thinking you were a god. On top of the world. There were jag-toothed roofs, and square-cut parapets, and fancy carved cupolas. Entire sections of town were devoted to Byzantine pillars and corniced facades, while other buildings were more modern with flat roofs and generators. The roofscape was painted a seductive blue by the moon, and a threatening black by its shadows. There was a wealth of adventure to be had here, and Gordon took him on a guided tour.

“That’s where I started the bin fire,” he said, pointing to WH Smiths.

“On purpose?” Billy asked.

“No, just a flicked cig, but it was a good shot.”

They were on the bus station roof now, Billy still feeling queasy after shuffling across the heavy gauge wires that criss-crossed the main street for Christmas decorations, or May Day celebrations, or whatever display the town councillors decided to string across the road. The cables were strung tight, one three-foot above the other allowing you to walk along the bottom one while you clung to the top one. It was a precarious trip though and Billy noticed that Gordon didn’t seem all that stable either. The large expanse of flat roof was just what they needed to regain their balance.

From here it was difficult to climb onto the arched roof of the Westmorland Shopping Centre, but the heating pipes and air ducts gave them plenty of footholds, provided you were careful not to burn your hands. Gordon was oblivious to that of course, but Billy called out when he touched the hot pipe, pulling his sleeve over his hands to complete the climb. Looking through the curved glass into the shopping arcade made it all worthwhile, the shop fronts looking like a toy town, and the plant pots double-o gauge railway furniture. He laid himself across the glass and soaked up the view while Gordon averted his eyes, the drop too much to bear.

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Along the north side of Market Place, then up Finkle Street, and they came upon New Shambles. Much of the canted roof was in shadow but Gordon hushed Billy with a silent finger. The boy wondered what was wrong, then the gargoyle took up his favourite gunslinger pose, hands dangling above imaginary pistols, and strode forward to meet his high noon. Gordon had watched numerous westerns through the TV shop skylight, but it was a book he'd found when putting out a bin fire that suggested the pose. Stephen King's *The Gunslinger*. It was the only book Gordon had read, and the mythical grandness of Roland, the last gunslinger, lit a fire of its own. He twitched his trigger fingers in readiness, and it wasn't until he neared the edge of the roof that Billy saw what he was doing. He was stalking his own dark man who was sitting near the gutter overlooking Galabarrow and Kirkland Confectioners.

"Okay liddle man," Gordon said to the hunched figure. "Keep yer hands where I can see 'em and stand up... slowly."

The figure jumped and almost tumbled off the roof into the cobbled alley, exclaiming through a mouthful of toffee.

"Fiffin 'eck, you fighdened be do deaf."

Billy felt a rush of excitement as a rather chubby gargoyle stood up and faced his doom.

"It won't be me who'll be the death of you," Gordon said. "One of these days you'll put so much toffee in your mouth you'll get lockjaw and never be able to eat again."

"Heaven forbid," Tadpole said after gulping the lot down.

"Tadpole, I'd like you to meet a friend. Billy."

He gestured for Billy to step forward, and when he cleared the shadows Tadpole nearly went over the edge again.

"Flippin' 'eck. What do you think you're doin? Erasmus will kill you."

"Not if you don't tell him."

"But, but, he's... well he's... you know. Human."

“We are brothers,” Gordon said. “Twinned in spirit and scarred at birth.” He pointed at his marble flash, then Billy’s white eyebrows. “We will seek out the unworthy and cast them into the pit of Guffs.”

Billy held out a hand. “Pleased to meet you Mr Tadpole.”

“I am not a mister,” Tadpole said.

“You’re not a tadpole either,” Gordon said. “Don’t be so pedantic.”

“Pedantic.” Another voice spun Billy round. “Have you swallowed a dictionary or something?” Randolph said from his perch beside the chimney. He uncurled his leg and slid down to join the others. “But Tadpole’s right. Erasmus will not be best pleased.”

“Then I’d best keep this to myself then,” Gordon said. “I just thought I would share my good fortune with my best friends, but if you’re only going to grumph about it then we will be on our way.” He put on a hurt expression and stalked away.

“I’m sorry,” Billy said. “I didn’t want to get you into trouble. If you show me the way, I’ll get down.” The offer was made, but inside he was heartbroken. He had only just met this incredible friend – no, brother – and already things were going sour. It was the story of his life, like the time he’d been given a new racing car by one of the foster parents. When he’d returned to the home it was taken off him straight away, the carers stating it was bad for morale if one child had more than another. After that he’d kept any toys hidden at the bottom of his sheets. Now he’d got a new friend and things were going the same way. It wasn’t fair. He fought back the tears.

Tadpole responded first, always more in tune with the vibes around him. “No. I’m sorry. Come back. If you’re a friend of Gordon’s then you’re a friend of mine.”

“And mine,” Randolph said. He might be intellectual but that didn’t mean he had no heart. He held out a claw in friendship.

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“Whoah. Three gargoyles. It’s like *The Three Musketeers*, and I’m D’Artagnan.”

“D’Artagnan?” Gordon asked.

“A gunslinger,” Billy explained. “Only I prefer Batman myself.”

“Oh I hate bats,” Tadpole said.

“Spiderman then.”

“That’s better.”

“Whatever,” Randolph said, drawing the four together in a pool of moonlight. “All for one and one for all.”

“Eh?” Gordon asked.

“Oh never mind. We will have to elevate you above those awful westerns.”

“Whatever ya say liddle missy,” Gordon said with a cheeky grin. “Come on, let’s show Billy the town.”

Tadpole and Randolph looked at each other, remembering the last time Gordon had led them across the rooftops, the stark black finger of The Devil’s Tower bulking against the night sky. They turned east instead and the four crossed Stramongate to get a bird’s eye view of the River Kent.

*

Dawn feathered the eastern horizon and began lifting the pall of night by the time Billy was ready to go home; return to Eastview Children’s Home, where few cared for him and even fewer cared about him. There was only Gordon left, Tadpole and Randolph having called it a night hours ago, and they sat in the lee of a Victorian chimney on the Youth Hostel Association roof. Birdsong was trying to kick-start the day and doing a pretty good job of it. Anyone who could sleep through the dawn chorus must already be dead, Billy thought, and the reality of returning to the living death of the home began to sink in. The reality of leaving his new friend.

So, they sat in silence, drinking in the sounds of a new day with differing emotions. For Billy it signalled an end to

the evening's excitement and his adventures among the rooftops of Kendal with the strangest of companions; for Gordon it was the sound of hidden promise in a day he had never been able to enjoy. Daytime adventure promised all the excitement for him that the night had provided for Billy, and now it was time to talk about that.

Billy sensed the question coming and pre-empted it.

"That would be dangerous."

"I know."

Gordon looked into the pale blue eyes and understood what had happened. They had become one during the night, not only twinned by the white flash they both wore but joined at the hip, or at least by the mind. Billy's wish had come true and he had met the gargoyle he'd been stalking for three weeks. Not only met but also befriended, and not only befriended but bonded with. They were brothers, and brothers would do anything for each other. Gordon's wish on the other hand was only partially filled. A close encounter of the third kind, contact, but what he really yearned for was to sample life as a ground-dweller. And that *would* be dangerous.

"You don't exactly look like the rest of us," Billy said.

"My feet do."

The glib answer attempted to hide his anxiety. He knew he looked nothing like the rest of the human race, although he had seen some pretty odd shapes from his perch above the shopping precinct. One woman appeared to have two heads, her hairdo was so enormous, and some of the chubby-chopped overeaters had more chins than a raft of gargoyles, but there was no denying that of pointy-eared fat-heads there were none. Plenty of fatheads, but lose the ears. The clawed hands would be a problem too.

"Maybe you could pass for a stunted jockey who's been in an accident?" Billy suggested but the joke fell on stony ground. This was far too serious to make fun of. "Sorry. I just can't see how we can make it work. There's nobody to see

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me up here at night, but during the day...” He didn’t have to continue. They both knew what he was saying and the look on Gordon’s face broke Billy’s heart. He had been given the most joyous night of his life and he couldn’t return the compliment. Unless...

The germ of an idea was forming in the boy’s head. Clothes were essential of course, but Gordon wouldn’t stand up to close examination in daylight. He simply looked too different from your average Kendalian. But something was lurking in the back of Billy’s mind, something he had seen.

“There is one thing that might help.”

Gordon’s ears pricked up, one of his main problems.

Billy stood up and began pacing to and fro. The schemer in him started working overtime as he selected pieces of the jigsaw and rearranged them into the picture he wanted. Gordon almost yelled out when the boy walked right to the edge before turning back. He stopped and looked at the gargoyle, tilting his head to get a better mental picture. Yes, it could work.

“I’ll need to check the dates. But if I’m right...”

Gordon stood slack jawed and waited, then Billy explained.

Chapter Four

The poster was still there when Billy got up the next morning. He only had two hours' sleep and even that was difficult because his mind was awash with memories of a fantastic night. Despite being exhausted the pictures came flooding back whenever he closed his eyes. Breakfast went by in a blur and he was thankful that the staff barely spoke, showing their usual disinterest in the boy they were charged to keep, but did not care about.

After three failed attempts at fostering him out Billy was well on the road to becoming institutionalised, and that was bad news for them. It meant they would have to clothe and feed him until he was sixteen, when he could be shovelled into a bedsit where he would fester in a sea of bitterness, and probably a life of crime. They knew he stole things from the home already, but turned a blind eye unless it belonged to a member of staff, then they came down on him like a ton of bricks.

So, nobody noticed the hollow stare during breakfast, or the dark rings beneath his eyes, and probably wouldn't have cared, even if they had known he'd spent most of the night on the town. Literally. With only the vaguest pretence of getting ready for school Billy slung his bag over his shoulder and was out of the door faster than a politician on budget day. He crossed the footbridge at Waterside, hearing the

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steady rush of the River Kent but not listening to it, and cut up Canal Head South beside the dry ski slope.

At the bottom of the steps to Kendal Castle he looked at the billboard fastened to the wrought iron fence. The poster was still there, a little weathered but eminently readable.

KENDAL AUTUMN FAIR
30th October to 5th November
IN THE GROUNDS OF KENDAL CASTLE

Billy read the dates again. The fair would be here for a week, ending Saturday. That was tomorrow. The thing had been going on around him and he hadn't even noticed.

ENTERTAINMENTS INCLUDE
FAIR GROUND ~ CAKE STALLS
BOOT SALE ~ PETS' ZOO
FACE PAINTING ~ HALLOWEEN PARADE
and concluding with ~ CIVIC BONFIRE

He had to resist rubbing his hands together like a miser counting his money. Face painting. Children would be wandering around Kendal painted as lions and tigers and goodness knows what else, had been for almost a week. Gordon wouldn't be out of place at all, giving him plenty of opportunity to savour life as a ground-dweller. All Billy had to do now was organise some clothes and it was game on.

*

While Billy raided the washing lines of Edgecombe Court, Gordon waited as patiently as he could for news of his great day, unaware that it would be topped off by a disastrous night. He behaved himself and sat still, no smoking and no moving around, and stuck to his allotted place on the rooftops of Kendal. It seemed like a long day, and it was with

great relief that he watched the sun disappear and the shadows creep out of the walls.

Two shadows in particular crossed Market Place, climbed over the shopping centre roof, then dropped down onto the long flat expanse of the bus station. Gordon was about to set off for the library when one of them grabbed his arm.

“Erasmus is looking for you,” Tadpole said.

“He’s sending someone to get you after dark,” Randolph added.

Gordon wasn’t sure what to say. Randolph never moved off his plinth before dark, and Tadpole hardly ever moved at all unless there was food involved. This must be serious. He glanced up at the darkening sky, judging how long he had before being hauled in front of the Grand Vizier. Half an hour? Not much more. There might well be no Keyser Soze but there definitely was an Erasmus, and Gordon feared him more than the black-hearted figure of Roman Krol.

“What for? Do you know?”

“You were seen with the boy,” Randolph said. “One of the Ruskins I think.”

“Hmmp. Never trust a gargoyle that looks like a frog,” Gordon said.

“Never trust a frog that’s been turned into a prince,” Tadpole said.

There was a quiver in Tadpole’s voice, and Gordon suddenly realised that if he was in trouble then most likely his friends were as well.

“I’ll tell him it was only me. Did anyone see you two?”

“I don’t know,” Randolph said. “But that’s not what we’re bothered about. You know what happens to a gargoyle who continues to disregard the code. We are clean but you, my friend, have one cross too many against your name. I don’t think he’s ever forgiven you for the fire thing.”

Tadpole shivered again. Being consigned to the stoneyard was a fate worse than death, and even if you did escape being crushed for sand, the prospect of a lifetime in someone’s

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garden next to one of those ridiculous gnomes was unthinkable.

“Thanks for the warning,” Gordon said. The stoneyard was a terrible fate, but it would be far worse if he got his friends involved as well. It was best they didn’t know what plans were afoot. “Look, I’d better face the music on my own,” he said. “You two get back before they see you. I’ll keep a low profile for a few days and see you later.”

Randolph and Tadpole were reluctant to move, sensing a parting of the ways that was more painful than the thought of being hauled over the coals by Erasmus.

“Are you sure you will be all right?” Randolph asked.

Gordon nodded then waved them away. It was getting dark and he had to meet Billy at seven. His friends stepped back. No more words were exchanged, and once they turned away Gordon headed for the library.

*

An hour later Gordon sat above the fire escape and examined the mixed emotions coursing through him. Billy had been waiting when he arrived and Gordon’s heart lifted at the sight of his blood brother. Saying goodbye to Randolph and Tadpole had left him feeling low, but even that depression had an exciting edge to it, like the beginning of a journey when you don’t know where it will end. Talking to Billy added to the excitement as the boy produced the clothes that were his introduction to a new world.

The boy explained about the fair, and as he spoke Gordon could see the crowds and hear the music. The face painting was perfect, and provided he was careful there was no reason anyone should suspect there was anything out of the ordinary. Gordon would be able to wander the land of the ground-dwellers and sample life on the other side. Where the grass was greener. A gentle buzz tickled his stomach, and he was short of breath. This was an adventure even he couldn’t

have imagined, and he had a vivid imagination. Unfortunately if every journey had a destination then it also had a leaving point, and if you were going somewhere then you had to leave something behind. What Gordon was leaving behind was the friendship of Randolph and Tadpole, because he suspected that this step would be one too far for Erasmus to forgive.

The Ruskins would be out in force looking for him tonight, and every night from now on, so he had to make a huge decision. To move forward and taste the freedom of the ground involved sacrificing his life among the skylights and roofscapes. He pondered that as he stared down the twisted metal staircase that would lead him away in the morning. Billy had left the clothes and gone home to bed, in dire need of sleep after last night's escapades, and arranged to meet Gordon beneath the fire escape in the morning. That meeting became the most important thing in the gargoyle's life, and no matter how much he weighed the pros and cons there was only going to be one outcome.

He climbed onto the chimneystack and looked around the moonlit rooftops one last time, shadows and light splitting the night into sharp angles and jagged edges. Chimneypots and carved pillars, gabled roofs and steepled towers, skylights and roofscapes. He soaked them all up, storing the memories, then clambered down into the shadows to wait for morning.

Chapter Five

Sunrise came just after seven but daylight lit the world half an hour earlier. It was a clear bright morning, and thoughts of the day ahead banished any doubts Gordon had during the night. The journey of a thousand miles was about to take its first step. Time to cut the ropes and cast off.

He had to get dressed, and that proved to be the first hurdle. Where on earth did all this stuff go? From his rooftop perch he had watched the passing multitudes, but apart from the outer garments and their heads, the rest of their bodies were a mystery. Randolph had seen more of the human body through Tan-Fast-ic's skylight, but Gordon had not, and although Billy showed him briefly how to dress, the gargoyle struggled to remember.

A pair of crooked mittens took twenty minutes before they became a pair of socks, and the trousers went on back to front twice before Gordon's odd-shaped backside felt comfortable. The shirt and coat were easier, both having arms in approximately the same place as Gordon's, but the boots took an age to figure out. It was obvious from the hole in the top where your foot went in, but try as he might the problem of which foot was which evaded him.

Although Gordon had been given toes like a human being, that's where the similarity ended. These boots were intended for someone with toes that started with a big one then slid down the scale to an insignificant pinkie that was neither use

nor ornament. Gordon's toes were all the same size and didn't taper down towards the outside edge because his feet were square. The only saving grace was that the boots were two sizes too big so he could fit into them, but he clomped about like a demented puppet.

Then there were the gloves.

If his toes were the wrong size then his fingers were a bigger problem. He only had three and a thumb. The gloves pulled on OK but his fingers either slid two-in-a-pocket or refused to find a finger hole at all. Once he'd got them on he looked like someone who had broken the little finger of each hand, the empty flap of leather dangling at an awkward angle. He supposed he should be thankful it wasn't the other way around though, more fingers on his hands than in the gloves.

Finally there was the baseball cap. Now here was an item of clothing Gordon simply couldn't figure out. It went on your head that was obvious, but whoever made it had stuck a duckbill on one edge, and that made it awkward to get straight. If he had it facing the front he couldn't see anything above his eyes, and if he turned it sideways it felt lopsided. Then he noticed the big white tick on the opposite side, and kicked himself. He knew the difference between a tick and a cross from the window displays at sale time, and realised which way was the front. The cap fit snugly on his head with the peak facing backwards, the tick perched nicely above his eyes.

Ready to face the day at last he clambered off the roof onto the fire escape and stood in front of the green door. The flaking green paint had been the doorway to a new world for Billy, and it was about to do the same for Gordon. If he went down these stairs there would be no going back. The Ruskins would find him, and Erasmus would banish him to the stoneyard, where life would become a living hell.

Gordon felt dizzy at the enormity of this decision, his head spinning, and he grabbed hold of the railing for support.

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Down there was the world of ground-dwellers not roofscapers, and he felt sick with anticipation.

“Are you afraid of heights as well?”

Gordon looked down into Billy’s smiling face.

“Come down here and it will go away.”

*

Once on the ground all of Gordon’s doubts evaporated, and excitement took over. There were so many places to go and people to see that he didn’t know what to do first. Just like Billy’s night on the tiles, Gordon’s first day on the ground was full of possibilities, so many in fact that he almost went into meltdown from the outset. The time of day narrowed the choices down, most of the shops were still closed, so the first thing Billy did was take Gordon to the café by the river.

The gargoyle couldn’t keep his eyes still. It was as if he’d never seen a tree or a car or a stone wall before, and the first person they encountered looked like an alien from outer space to Gordon. From this low angle everything looked different, and he was amazed that nobody paid them much attention. His first instinct was to hide his face as they turned into Sandes Avenue towards the bridge, but to the world at large there was nothing unusual about the boy with snow-white eyebrows and his younger brother. Apart from the fact that the youngster was painted like a stone devil.

Sunshine bled over the hilltops, running like treacle into the valley, and by the time they passed Stramongate Primary School it was licking at the rooftops of Gordon’s old world. The day was bright and clear without a hint of the storm that was to come, and he thought it was the most beautiful day he had ever seen. Billy stifled a laugh every time Gordon’s eyes bulged at something new, understanding exactly how he felt. The great adventure had begun.

The Greasy Spoon Café was next to the Bowling Green near the bridge, and they went down the stairs to the riverside

path two at a time. Billy was hungry and Gordon was just plain excited. He could have floated down the steps if he hadn't been carved from stone, and as they approached the ramshackle hut his head was in a state of perpetual motion. His eyes flicked from the smooth lawn of the Bowling Green to the glistening waters of the river, and then to the gently swaying trees that bordered them both. The café originally belonged to the bowling club, and the balcony faced the clipped green square, but a patio had been laid to one side overlooking the river. Several tables stood empty.

Billy ordered breakfast, and Gordon was filled with the possibilities of this brave new world. The list seemed endless. There were bacon sandwiches, sausage sandwiches, and egg sandwiches, and for a little extra you could have tomatoes or mushrooms or both. You could even have bacon sausage and egg sandwiches although just how they fit all that in one breadcake was beyond Gordon. There were beans on toast, egg on toast, and even bacon egg and tomato on toast, and then there was something called the Full Monty. A worried look crossed Billy's face.

"You're not a vegetarian are you?"

Gordon smiled at the question after all those spit-roast pigeons, and shook his head. Relieved, Billy ordered two bacon and tomato-dip sandwiches and two lemonades, then produced a battered leather purse filled with coins.

Despite the crisp morning air they sat at a table on the patio, steam spiralling from the sandwiches, and Gordon tucked into his first ground-dweller's meal. Tomato squirted from the breadcake at the first bite and dribbled down his chin while tasty lengths of bacon awakened his taste buds. To hell with pigeon, he was a bacon man from now on. He ate the sandwich in three quick gulps, washing it down with the lemonade. Billy took a while longer. Up on the bridge the town was beginning to come to life, traffic noise drifting down from the roadway, and Gordon couldn't wait to find out what else there was to see.

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“Will they miss you?” Billy asked.

The question caught Gordon by surprise.

“Did they miss you the other night?”

“There is nobody to miss me. Mister Dowker can’t wait for me to be old enough, so he can get rid of me, and most of the other kids are too young to notice. They still think they’re going to find new homes.”

“Maybe they will.”

“I didn’t.”

For a moment the boy was far older than his years, a grown-up aged twelve, who had never known his parents.

“Don’t you want to know who your parents are?”

Gordon couldn’t understand this trait of human nature. He had no relatives because he was carved out of stone, and would give anything to have what the ground-dwellers had – a heritage, family, someone who was a part of you, joined by blood. How could they abandon each other and then not care about it? Didn’t they realise what they were missing? A link with the past and a road to the future?

Billy was silent for a moment, then looked Gordon in the eye.

“Sometimes at night, before I go to sleep, I feel as if I’m drowning. There’s nobody to pull me out because there never was anybody for me. I just popped into the world with no past and no future. Just the present.”

Billy’s interpretation of Gordon’s thoughts jolted him, but the irony of meeting his first human and discovering that he was as lost as Gordon, jolted him even more. From his place overlooking Kendal he had watched people from afar, and yearned for their touch and the warmth of their affections. Young lovers walked hand in hand, mothers carried their babies in the nest of their arms, and pensioners helped each other climb the stairs that they could not manage on their own. All the time there was contact. Eye contact, physical contact, and a joining of the heart. Billy had lost all of that, if he’d ever had it.

“You aren’t going back are you?” Billy said, changing the subject.

This time it was Gordon’s turn to be silent. With Erasmus sending the Ruskins after him, and the prospect of ending his days in the stoneyard, there seemed little chance of a return to the world above Kendal. He felt no sense of loss over that though, his excitement at the new challenges far outweighing any sadness he felt at not seeing Randolph and Tadpole again. Anyway, his biggest challenge was sitting right here in front of him. The boy needed reminding what it was to be human, and who better to show him than someone who had observed human nature for almost a hundred and fifty years?

“What is there to go back for, when I’ve got you?”

Billy smiled.

“Yeah, right. Who needs anyone else? Come on, there’s lots to see.”

They stood in unison and turned towards the riverside path. Adventure lay ahead of them and they would face it together. As they headed along the river, Gordon hoped that having Billy show him life at ground level would rekindle some of the boy’s enthusiasm for life.

*

Half an hour later they rounded the bend and came to the Kent Street Bridge. They had crossed over earlier to stay on the sunny side, and it felt much warmer now that the yellow orb was warming the air. The day was livening up. Several dog walkers were out on the footpath now, and Gordon couldn’t believe his eyes when an elderly lady put a plastic bag on her hand like a glove and stooped to pick up her dog’s steaming pile of morning glory. The thought of what she might want it for blew the gargoyle’s mind. Urgh.

Gordon also got his first close-up look at water-based fowl. On the grassy bank next to the Goose Holme Putting Green a family of ducks were preening themselves as Billy

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lead Gordon past the narrow footbridge. The boy was pointing out Kendal Castle to their left when a savage quack made Gordon jump. An angry duck wagged its tail and darted towards them. It was the strangest flying creature Gordon had ever seen, with feet like splayed cheese slices and a bill like a baseball cap without the tick. The bird was broader in the beam than the pigeons that infested the rooftops, and two of its family had their heads twisted back to front with their eyes closed.

Further along the embankment two long-necked ducks with swept-back wings began to show an interest, waddling over to them. Gordon thought they might be the short one's parents. Billy watched as his friend bent for a closer look, and didn't see the danger. The gargoyle moved at the crouch, sidling towards the sleeping group while keeping his back to the swans. That was a mistake. Gordon was so intent on the angry duck that he didn't see the swans coming. His baggy jeans provided the perfect target, and since he was sticking his butt out, they weren't going to disappoint him.

With the hiss of a snake and the punch of a ram, an orange bill smacked him right between the posts. Gordon stumbled forward, and with a head that was too big for this kind of thing, overbalanced. His feet stubbed the ground in their unfamiliar shoes, and his head came down to meet them, performing an ungainly forward roll. Gymnastics wasn't the end of it, he was about to join the diving team, and executing a perfect back flip double twist swan dive he gaddunshed into the river.

Billy leapt forward, scattering the ducks and swans as he cut through them. An explosion of water splashed the shore, and Gordon disappeared beneath the surface, his navy blue baseball cap with the tick on the back acting as a buoy for his position. Billy panicked, wondering what to do. He should dive in after him of course, but another thing they had in common was... he couldn't swim. The thought of losing his friend by drowning flushed Billy's cheeks, and the panic

became terror. He looked up and down the path in the hope that someone had seen the tragic accident, but the path was empty. It was still early, and in any case most people going to work took the west bank.

Then he saw the hosepipe curled near the putting green and unscrewed it from the standpipe. Keeping hold of one end he threw the green coil out into the river and watched it sink. The baseball cap drifted away leaving no trace of his fallen friend.

Beneath the waves Gordon was in a panic as well. Gargoyles didn't take swimming lessons, and he had no idea what the crawl or the breaststroke was. On top of that he was made of stone. Despite flapping his arms like a demented budgie, he was doing the fifty-yard sprint in double quick time... all the way to the bottom. Even so, his eyes took in all around him. This was a part of the world even Billy hadn't seen, and it was an eye opener. Forget about Jacques Cousteau's underwater documentaries, there were no dolphins or whales or schools of tropical fish. Down here there was just gloom, and weeds, and rusty bicycles.

Gordon hit bottom feet first, and was surprised how firm the riverbed was. Shingle beaches simply became shingled bottom, and if you've ever had shingles on your bottom you'll know that's very uncomfortable. Fortunately the shoes that caused so much trouble on land protected his feet from the stones on the riverbed, and once his eyes adjusted to the light he saw how much trouble he was in.

He was only twelve feet from the riverbank, but those twelve feet were a battleground of twisted wreckage and discarded rubbish. A Victorian pram lay belly up in front of him, and three bicycles were half buried beyond that. There was a shattered television set, a pair of hi-fi speakers, and a deflated space hopper whose eyes stared blankly from its soiled orange face. The entire catch must have settled here with the current as it swept round the bend in the river,

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snagged in a quiet backwater that had become an underwater rubbish dump.

Panic resurfaced when Gordon realised you couldn't breathe underwater, and his predicament slammed home with all the force of a bad dream. Forget breaststroke; let's strike out for the banking. As quickly as the realisation sank in, another thought flushed it away. Gargoyles don't breathe. Crikey-moley, of course they don't. When did a stonemason ever carve a pair of lungs? Wings yes, but lungs, never. Now this underwater world took on a new dimension. Adventure central. Neutral buoyancy helped, and he began to move with balletic grace. Great swooping strides and bouncing somersaults despite being made of stone.

He switched on the TV and watched an imaginary western, shooting the bad guys as *The Magnificent Seven* theme blasted from the long-dead speakers. The pram, when turned over, became a stagecoach, and John Wayne accompanied him on a journey to Lordsburg. Then he was Steve McQueen, jumping the barbed wire fence on his motorbike as he performed *The Great Escape*, despite the fact that the front wheel of the bicycle was as bent as a government minister. Finally he walked in the traditional arms-out-front pose of the deep-sea diver searching for sunken treasure. A green air-pipe drifted down from the surface and he tied it to his belt to complete the picture. He looked around for the pride of the Spanish Main, and then glanced up at the hull of his ship.

That jolted him back to reality. There was no ship riding at anchor above him, only the distorted figure of a small boy with St Vitus's Dance. Billy was hopping from one foot to the other in a wild panic that filled Gordon with sorrow and happiness at the same time. To be so worried about a drowning gargoyle you had to care about him, and the sight of Billy's distress proved that he did. He stopped play-acting and struck out for the shore, climbing the slope with ease,

and broke the surface ten feet downstream. Billy lunged toward him immediately.

“Gordon... Gordon... Are you all right? God I thought you’d drowned. I couldn’t get you... I can’t swim... I...”

The boy pulled Gordon up the banking, patting him down as if searching for hidden weapons, but simply checking all his limbs were intact. Billy’s inability to help weighed heavy and he began to cry, as much with relief as despair.

“Billy. It’s all right.” The gargoyle put a wet arm round the boy’s shoulder. “I know you would have come for me if you could. I’d do the same for you. But at least you threw me a life-line, that’s what brought me out.”

Billy calmed down at that. “Did I save you?”

“Of course you did.”

“I saved you didn’t I? Yeah. Spidey to the rescue.”

Gordon didn’t know who Spidey was but if he was anything like John Wayne then that was good enough for him. The sun was warm on his back and that was good too, because standing here beside the river he began to realise how cold the water was. Billy noticed him shiver and came off cloud nine.

“Oh yes. Come on let’s get them clothes dry.”

*

It took an hour for Gordon’s clothes to dry enough to put back on. They weren’t tumble-dryer fresh, but close enough, and Billy didn’t want to risk having a naked gargoyle found behind the putting green. Gordon’s constitution meant that a little damp wasn’t a problem anyway, being mainly stone with a touch of Polyfiller. The wait took a chunk out of their day, but it did mean the shops were open once he’d finished dressing.

Walking up Kent Street was pleasant enough, but when they entered Market Place Gordon couldn’t keep his eyes still. This was one of his favourite haunts but he hardly

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recognised the place from down here. Looking in the shop windows he understood why so few people bothered looking at the rooftops. This was a-kid-in-a-candy-store stuff. There was simply too much to take in at one go.

The toyshop at the bottom of the street was full to the brim with exciting war machines, aeroplanes and remote control cars. There were replica pistols, miniature armies and entire battlefields, not to mention building bricks, doll's houses and... gargoyles? A plastic glove puppet that looked remarkably like Tadpole stared back from the window, the resemblance even stronger when you realised it had no legs. If Tadpole didn't start doing more exercise this is exactly how he'd end up. "Own Your Very Own Boglin", the box read. "Six to Choose From". Gordon watched the one on display very closely, waiting for some telltale movement, but just like the real thing it wasn't about to move during the day.

Half the square was in shadow so they stayed on the other side to help Gordon's clothes dry, but there were still plenty of shops to look at. Mounsey's Stationers had more pens than you could shake a stick at, and the variety of notepads and drawing books was staggering. Further along was The Famous Army Store and in their window the soldiers were full size. Whereas the armies on display at the toyshop were fully armed, the dummy in the window here simply wore a camouflaged jacket and khaki trousers.

The mannequin next to it would have pleased Randolph though. Womannequin more like, and Randy would most certainly have liked it because the only thing she was wearing was a smile. Gordon began to understand what his friend saw in Gwen, and wondered if he should pay a visit to Tan-Fast-ic to top up his complexion. The curves on display here bore no resemblance to even the most attractive gargoyle, and he wondered how females managed to keep upright with so many bumps sticking out front?

Billy tugged at his sleeve.

"Gordon, stop drooling. You'll get arrested."

Gordon let the boy move him on, and as they passed the Great War Memorial his eyes picked out a familiar sign. Across the road WH Smith stood with its door wedged open, and he simply had to look in the place he'd almost burned down six months ago. They had to negotiate Stricklandgate first, and Gordon was about to be introduced to one of the ground-dweller's most unusual rituals. Crossing the road. This was almost as strange as picking up dog muck in a plastic glove, but infinitely more dangerous.

Town was getting busier, and by the time they reached the pelican crossing there were a dozen people waiting to cross. A constant stream of traffic edged along the road, and everyone waited impatiently for the magic word. Gordon didn't know what the magic word was so he waited with them. Billy looked at his feet. A bus the size of a small building crawled by followed by a red car driven by a man with extremely angry eyes. The traffic wasn't moving fast enough for him, and the people milling around the crossing were a distraction. The bus stopped, its passage blocked by a van delivering bottles of wine to Threshers. Mister angry glared at the bus with such ferocity you'd have thought he would melt its tyres. A car pulled round the delivery van and the bus moved on a space then stopped again.

The crowd grew to twenty, and still they waited. Gordon wasn't sure what the hold-up was and felt like a runner in the starting blocks. He was wedged between a man wearing a blue boiler suit and a woman with bigger overhangs than the womannequin in the shop window. If she toppled forward her face wouldn't hit the ground. Across the road a short lamp post protruded above the crowd with a picture of a red standing man shining under its cowl. Above it was a green walking man, but for now the red light was on. Several people glared at it to change, and Gordon suddenly understood what they were waiting for. Why on earth they needed reminding how to walk was beyond him.

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The bus inched forward, blocking the crossing, and wouldn't you believe that's when the green man came on. A surge of humanity pushed out into the road but there wasn't enough room for them all to get through. The green man flashed and a beeper sounded its warning. The top-heavy woman almost flattened Gordon in her haste to get across, and her appendages nudged into the back of Mr boiler suit, who didn't seem to mind at all. Mr Angry fumed in his car.

The red man came on again, and the charge stopped as quickly as it had started. Gordon was still on the wrong side of the road, and he looked round for Billy. The boy was standing in the doorway of WH Smith's wondering where the gargoyle had gone, and then he saw him. At first he looked dismayed, then his face broke into a smile and finally a laugh. Gordon smiled back and shrugged his shoulders. There was obviously a lot to learn about getting around on the ground, and it took him two more attempts to cross the road. He felt hot and sticky, but at least his clothes had dried, and it was a blessed relief when they went into the relative quiet of the bookshop.

It took Gordon's eyes a moment to adjust after the brilliant sunshine outside, but once they did, he couldn't believe them. He had never seen so many books and magazines in all his life. Every conceivable subject was covered on the magazine aisle, and he identified his main problem straight away. If he wanted to browse through the glossy magazines he'd better hope his favourites were on the bottom shelves because he couldn't reach past shelf three. Also there seemed to be some kind of road-crossing system in operation here, because a dozen people were reading the latest magazines while waiting to cross. Where to, he couldn't tell.

Billy nudged his way through the crush to the comic stand, but Gordon saw something much more interesting. Through a gap in the crowd he noticed a flash of colour, then it was gone. He tried to squeeze through but couldn't and

eventually detoured round the end of the aisle. A girl serving at the till looked down at him and smiled.

“Nice face paint.”

Gordon smiled back then walked past the video shelf. A television played silent pictures at the end of the counter, and John Wayne stepped into the dusty street of Rio Bravo. Goose pimples broke out on the back of Gordon’s neck, and he automatically took up the stance. The showdown was on. Gun in holster the tall dark lawman with the battered hat strode toward his destiny. Gary Cooper or John Wayne, or anyone you cared to mention, it didn’t matter to Gordon, the face-off in a quiet street was all that mattered. You could bring on a dozen bad guys and the gunslinger would see them off.

He watched for a few minutes, and could have quite happily stood there all day, but there were so many things to see. A selection of compact discs backed onto the video section, then a bargain basket. End of line stationery and broken pencils jockeyed for position, but the display at the end of the shop drew his attention. A King called. Gordon felt himself being drawn by a force greater than himself, darker than himself, tugging at his stomach with warm hands. His neck flushed with excitement when he rounded the corner, and words he had read before leapt from the display of paperback fiction.

Dark Tower – The Gunslinger

Stephen King drew Gordon’s hand, and it reached out for the book he had first read by the light from a rooftop window. This was an updated edition; the cover revamped with a painting of the gunslinger looking at the tower in the distance and it was that picture that sent shards of ice down his spine. The painting was abstract, and completely unreal, but the outline had an air of familiarity about it. The tower was tall and stark with jagged ledges stabbing at the sky

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around it. Gordon remembered falling from one of those ledges as Roman Krol lunged for him with flashing claws. Stephen King might have written this fictional tale, but the cover artist must have been from Kendal, because The Dark Tower of the book was The Devil's Tower of gargoyle myth, the clock tower of Kendal's Town Hall.

Gordon read the first line, the familiar excitement clawing at his stomach and up his throat. *The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed...* He remembered Roland's quest to catch the dark man and in a way it mirrored Gordon's much smaller quest to discover the secret of Roman Krol. Of course everything in Gordon's world was much smaller than in Stephen King's, he was only half the size of the great author, but the picture of the tower burned into his mind. Disappointment crowded in when he flicked through the book and discovered that the beautiful coloured illustrations were missing. It was from one of those that he'd learned the traditional gunslinger pose, hands hovering over a pair of custom pistols while death and destruction lay all around him. This new edition settled for a couple of pen and ink drawings at the beginning of each chapter.

The disappointment was short lived when he glanced along the shelf. The words *Dark Tower* leapt out at him again, and again. Not *The Gunslinger* this time, but *Dark Tower Two* and *Three*. And *Four*. Great galloping buckets of gump. *The Drawing of the Three* and *The Wastelands* and *Wizard and Glass* were the follow-up books to Gordon's favourite read. His only read actually, but that simply made them all the more important. The silhouette of The Devil's Tower showed in the background of each cover, and he touched them with fear as well as excitement.

When the hand landed on his shoulder he almost screamed. Billy stood behind him holding a WH Smith bag.

"Spiderman," he said lifting the bag. "Seen anything you like?"

He noticed the book in Gordon's hand.

“Oh, I’m sorry but I don’t think I can afford that. I’ve just got enough for dinner and the fair.”

Gordon saw the look on his friend’s face and put the book back. “That’s all right. I’ve read it anyway,” he said, forcing himself not to look at the other books in case Billy felt guilty about them as well. “Where next?”

Billy’s face brightened.

“Well, the fair doesn’t open for a couple of hours, so I thought we’d grab a bite to eat then check out the bottom of town before heading up to the castle.”

“The castle? Yeah. I’ve never seen that up close.”

“Sorted,” Billy said, but as he led Gordon back into the sunshine he felt guilty at not buying the book.

*

The day was moving into its second quarter, and was about to take its first dip towards the violence that would end the night. Morning had moved offstage, and a sunny afternoon kicked off act two. Acts three and four were still a long way off. As they walked down Finkle Street, Gordon’s mind kept returning to the image of The Dark Tower. Even while they’d been eating their dinner he couldn’t escape it, the reality of the town hall’s clock tower staring through the café window from across the road.

Gordon was so taken with the bacon and tomato sandwich, that he ordered one again for dinner, but Billy suggested chicken tikka instead. The gargoyle knew what chicken was, and it sounded too much like pigeon for his liking, so he compromised and had cheese on toast. A hot drink replaced the lemonade, and he had to wait a few minutes until it was cool enough to drink, but when he did, mmmm... hot chocolate for him from now on.

Lunchtime was Gordon’s introduction to Billy’s hero, Spiderman. Once they had cleared some space on the table the boy spread his comic out, showing Gordon the gothic

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paintings of a night-world not dissimilar to his own. There were darkened rooftops, and glaring windows, topped by flagpoles and carvings, and even the occasional gargoyle. The webslinger swung from building to building as he rescued the damsel in distress and protected the city from the tyranny of men. Just a gunslinger in disguise really, and fortunately he didn't look anything like a spider. No wonder the boy spent so much time looking up at the rooftops; they were his fantasy world just as the roadways and pavements were Gordon's. They were twins in reverse. Both gunslingers in their own way.

Finkle Street sloped down towards Stramongate. The town was busier now, and people milled about the pavement, window-shopping, or simply enjoying the day. They were all taller than Gordon, but he didn't feel out of place. After an incident filled morning he had finally adjusted to the clothes he wore, and the cowboy hat Billy bought from a charity shop fittingly replaced the baseball cap. Even the shoes didn't hurt his feet any more. He felt as human as he was ever going to, and apart from the oversized head he fit in pretty well.

The old lady made him feel even more at home. She was short, with such a hunched back that he thought she was a gargoyle as well, and she was struggling up the hill with a wheeled shopping bag. If she moved any slower she would be going backwards and at one point she almost did. The effort of forging up the slope was taking its toll, and after one particular surge she overbalanced, leaning backwards with a look of panic on her face. Her feet shuffled back two steps and she regained control, but not enough to save the shopping.

The bag fell over, spilling her shopping across the pavement.

Billy dashed over, chasing a can of Heinz Tomato soup halfway down the street. He trapped it like a centre forward, then collected a can of Farrow's peas that had come to rest in

the gutter. Gordon joined him, helping the old lady sit on a low wall before unpeeling the plaid bag. Assorted bits and pieces were scattered across the pavement, and as Gordon helped pick them up a strange thing happened.

The people strolling along the road had kept to themselves, avoiding all human contact as if afraid of catching the plague. It had been like that all day, and it puzzled Gordon why they didn't talk to each other? They didn't even make eye contact.

Now, with the little old lady getting her breath back, and Billy and Gordon collecting her shopping, a man in a Reebok tracksuit picked up a bag of sugar and brought it over. Another old lady – not quite so hunchbacked – picked up the box of teabags, and a young woman with a pushchair rescued a jar of Wilkinson's Orange Marmalade that had remained miraculously intact. Two women came out of the shop whose wall they were using to see if she needed an ambulance? They bundled her into the boutique, despite her protests, and put the kettle on. In the world of the ground-dweller, Gordon learned, a cup of tea could cure just about anything.

Billy came up beside him and smiled. There were many things the gargoyle didn't understand about this place, but one thing shone out of the boy's face. Despite his lack of family, and possibly even because of it, he had an infinite well of compassion for those less fortunate than himself. In view of his background there weren't too many who qualified, but if they did, this boy would help.

Judging by the reaction to this minor disaster, most of the people around them felt the same. It was a heart-warming moment, and made Gordon even more determined to spend his life down here. These people were strange, but they had something inside that made them pull together in times of need. Some would call it the Dunkirk spirit, but Gordon had no idea what Dunkirk was. Probably some kind of whisky.

With the old lady safely inside the shop Billy nudged Gordon to get up. They were setting off down the street when

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a cold hand gripped Gordon's heart. He saw his reflection in a window across the road, and for a moment he was Roland, the last gunslinger. His cowboy hat was pulled down over his eyes, and the coat unzipped, flapping like a dustcoat in the old west. All he lacked was a pair of six-guns hanging from his hips.

Two men stood with their backs to him, looking in the window of Neville Goldenthall Jeweller and Watchmaker. From the back he didn't recognise them, but their shadowy reflections dwarfed his own, and what he saw in their eyes was inhuman. Forget the kind nature of the people who'd helped the old lady, these two wouldn't help their mother if she were falling into a combine harvester.

They were the burglars from the roof.

Gordon looked at the familiar rooftop, remembering the dormer window with its splintered frame, and knew why these men were browsing at the jeweller's window. He saw a small man coming out of an office inside. The man pushed a pair of spectacles up his formidable nose and locked the office door, then he tapped his fingers over a keypad before drawing the blind and coming out. He was closing early. Billy was halfway down the street before he noticed Gordon wasn't with him, and called back for him to hurry up.

The spell was broken.

Gordon's reflection stood alone in the window, the archetypal stranger in a town that was not his, an outsider who would walk these streets briefly before moving on. He suddenly felt lonely, and hurried after his friend, his only friend among the ground-dwellers, then stopped as he passed the bottom of New Shambles. Billy held both hands palms up in a "what now?" gesture.

"Can you afford a bag of Kendal Mint Cake?"

"I didn't know you had a sweet tooth?"

"It's not for me."

Gordon wasn't sure why he was buying sweets for someone he couldn't see without condemning himself to the

stoneyard, but Billy gave him a pound coin, and Gordon walked up the cobbled alley to Galabarrow and Kirkland Confectioners.

Chapter Six

It was late afternoon by the time they crossed the river again, and in a chilling portent of the future they passed the Kirkbie Mason Stoneyard. Gordon felt as if someone had walked over his grave, and crossed the road to avoid passing too close. The wire fence was high with twists of barbed wire across the top, but it didn't block the view of tons of reclaimed stone and broken statues. A large wooden building stood in the far corner of the yard, and Gordon saw the most terrifying beast he'd ever seen standing beside it. More vicious than a rabid guard dog, the stone-saw waited to bite into Gordon's flesh.

This was the pit of hell, a place no gargoyle wanted to see, and it was the ultimate resting place for any too corroded for repair. How Roman Krol avoided this place Gordon didn't know. A headless statue that was more severely handicapped than the Venus de Milo screamed for help against the shed wall, and three ornamental copingstones lay broken at its feet. Half a millstone leaned against the saw like a broken Polo mint, and the entire yard was coated with dust from years of chipping and grinding and gnashing of teeth. Gordon turned away and hurried after Billy.

Excitement quickly banished his fears when they reached the gate at the foot of the castle path. The poster was a little dog-eared, flapping in ragged tears on two corners, but the words lifted his heart.

KENDAL AUTUMN FAIR
30th October to 5th November
IN THE GROUNDS OF KENDAL CASTLE

He looked up the hill and could see only adventure. A thousand steps were cut into the hillside, describing an uneven line through the trees, and reappeared in the distance just below the horizon. Groups of people were already climbing the stairway to heaven, and somewhere over the brow of the hill Gordon could hear music drifting through the air. The sun was low in the western sky, but its dying rays painted the hilltop with bright red brushstrokes.

Billy rattled the purse in front of Gordon's face and smiled.

"Forget about bacon sandwiches. You haven't lived until you've had a hotdog."

Gordon remembered the woman with the plastic bag on her hand, and doubted if the animal that produced that little pile of joy could taste too good, cooked or uncooked, but when in Rome... He followed Billy up the steps, and they were halfway up the hill before they drew another breath.

*

If the rooftops and windows of Kendal were his world, and the streets below were Billy's, then the world of Kendal's Autumn Fair was on another planet altogether. Gordon had never seen so many people in one place, even on the busiest market day, and he wondered where on earth they all came from. The music hit him like a punch in the chest as they cleared the top of the hill, each beat throbbing in his very being as the carnival atmosphere kicked into high gear. He felt as if he could swallow the sounds if he opened his mouth.

The fair was split into two sections, separated by a rope fence. On the side nearest the castle ruins were rows of stalls and tents, bedecked with streamers, and bunting, and

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coloured lights. Across the rope were the carnival rides; roundabouts with giant teacups, dodgem cars and shooting galleries. A ghost train stood to one side, and the big wheel towered over everything.

The field had been transformed into a world of colour and movement and noise, and to cap it all a barrage of smells attacked his nostrils. Smells so tempting he could taste them. Fried onions fought a losing battle against the sickly sweet smell of candyfloss and toffee apples. Music drew him in like the sirens onto the rocks, and he went willingly, led by Billy who couldn't stop looking at the expression on Gordon's face. This was going to be fun.

The warm glow of the setting sun lit the scene, furry seeds drifting in the blood-red shafts of light. Late season midges hovered and swooped, drawn by the heat and light, and the tangle of humanity. It was a picture painted in heaven, and Gordon forgot all about being an outsider. He felt right at home. As the fair got under way everyone was happy, and he didn't see a single face without a smile. Small children darted between the adults, unable to contain themselves, and babes in arms bounced excitedly as they pointed at anything and everything that caught their eyes.

With so much choice he didn't know where to go first so Billy stepped in.

"Come on. To the rides."

He ignored the stalls – there would be plenty of time for them later – and went through a gap in the rope towards the Crash Car Rally. Screams of joy came from the dodgem cars as they bounced off each other, whizzing around the perimeter of the rink. Elvis Presley shouted about a hound dog over the speakers, and sparks exploded from the wired ceiling as the contacts brushed across the circuit. The sparks worried Gordon, but being the last gunslinger he could hardly show that to Billy.

The music died and the cars slowed, raising a collective groan from the drivers. As soon as the cars came to a

standstill Billy pushed him forward, and Gordon almost tripped over the top step. The sudden rush caught him by surprise, looking more like a Le Mans start than a carnival ride. Onlookers who had been standing impatiently round the edge charged onto the metal floor, each making a beeline for their favourite car. Gordon was shoved aside by a girl wearing a red fleece, then Billy grabbed his arm and pulled him into a battered Easter egg with a steering wheel.

The egg-shaped car was surrounded by a thick rubber band at the bottom, and the long metal arm reached skyward as its contact pressed against the ceiling. Gordon looked nervously at the flat metal connector but there were no sparks yet. Billy took the wheel and the gargoyle half expected to see Mr Angry Eyes from outside WH Smith's in the next car. A little old lady smiled across at him instead, then giggled like a schoolgirl. Gordon braced himself, his adventurous spirit failing for a moment as he waited for the ride to start.

Elvis sprang out of the speakers again, this time warning everyone to be careful of his blue suede shoes, and the car leapt forward. Billy swung the wheel round and headed for the perimeter so he could get a good run, but before they got halfway there Gordon's teeth were rattled in his head. The collision jerked them sideways and banged his knees into the steering column. Sparks jumped from the ceiling and he ducked. This was madness, how could anyone enjoy being ragged about like this? Billy spun the car to the left and... thump, thump... A double impact slewed them round so they were facing the wrong way, then the little old lady rammed them head on. The sweet smile changed into a snarling mask, and she cackled her triumph as she almost broke Gordon's neck. Insanity.

It took Billy three attempts before the car was moving again, and this time he successfully dodged the neighbouring cars as he built up speed around the edge of the circuit. A boy and his father swerved into their path, but Billy swung round then doubled back. Gordon laughed, he couldn't help it. The

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sparks formed their own display but none landed on him, and as Billy targeted a girl with her boyfriend the fun kicked in. Elvis belted his song out and Billy went on the attack. Wham... Wham... First the girlfriend boyfriend combo, and then the father and son. Gordon screamed with laughter as another car sideswiped them before they got their sights on the old lady. Forget the helpless old dear in Finkle Street, this one was vicious. As they lined up on her she rammed a lone boy so hard his head nearly came off.

Gordon hunched his shoulders as if he could urge the car forward even faster, and the cross hairs targeted the rusty yellow dodgem car. Full steam ahead. They had a clear run and Gordon prayed that Elvis wouldn't finish before they could exact revenge. Sparks leapt around them. The wheels thrummed along the metal floor. Billy's knuckles were squeezed white on the steering wheel. Target acquired, full speed, wham...

The world was one big laugh. At first he chuckled, and then he guffawed, and finally he was cackling like a mad thing. Wham-bam-thank-you-mam. Bloodlust rushed through his head, and he wanted to ram every single car on the track. Laugh, laugh and laugh again. He laughed so hard his eyes were watering, no, crying. He was actually crying with laughter.

Elvis finished, and his blue suede shoes survived to fight another day. Gordon's stomach ached and he wasn't sure if it was because of the laughter or the battering they had taken. The little old lady climbed out of her car and, he noticed she wasn't alone. Her granddaughter toppled out, and they were both grinning at each other. The predator in her eyes had gone, leaving just a little old dear with an adventurous spirit. Gordon smiled at her, but was immediately swept away by the next rush of crash-bang-wallop drivers, and Billy guided him off the track.

Next it was over to the carousel.

Gordon's legs were still like jelly when they got there. This wasn't the teacup roundabout – that was for babies – but the motorbike ride. There wasn't such a crowd for this one so they had no trouble getting bikes next to each other, Gordon on the outside and Billy on the next row in. The bikes were fastened to a bracket, and didn't move at all until the whole ride started up, running in a circle over an undulating track. After the dodgems this should be a piece of cake. Unfortunately, being made of stone would prove to be his undoing.

The ride started slowly, the gentle rise and fall quite pleasant at first. As it gathered momentum Gordon had to keep his head down, the wind catching under the brim of his cowboy hat, trying to lift it off. By the time the bikes were whooping over each rise in the track his stomach began to complain, and once it reached full speed he realised his mistake. Gravity might work downwards but centrifugal force had its own agenda, tugging at his sleeve like an invisible imp, trying to dislodge him from the bike. The world rushed past in a blur and the imp grew stronger. Gordon's weight doubled, then trebled as the momentum forced him sideways. He couldn't help leaning out from the bike, and hung on for dear life.

Billy saw what was happening and began to panic. Not the all out panic of the riverbank, but a slow burn panic that tugged at his throat then wormed into his belly. Gordon couldn't hang on, and as much as that worried Billy, his biggest fear was what if he hit someone doing sixty miles an hour. A falling boy would be bad enough, but half a ton of carved stone could kill somebody.

The ride hit full speed, and Gordon slid sideways in the saddle. He forgot about trying to keep his hat on, simply gripping the handlebars with all his strength. As strong as he was that wasn't going to be enough. If he weighed half a ton on dry land, then he weighed two tons as the ride threw him sideways. The screws holding the bike began to buckle, and

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the bracket twisted on its mount. The evening sky whizzed past, a blur of sky intermingled with carnival lights and bunting. The ground was just a swirl of darkness. The cowboy hat sailed into the crowd.

Billy was sweating, calculating how long they'd been on the ride, and when it would stop. Time had no meaning now, and that old adage, time-flies-when-you're-enjoying-yourself kicked in. He most certainly wasn't enjoying himself, and therefore time went into reverse. It felt as if they'd been going round in circles forever. The bracket on Gordon's bike bent outwards, and one screw pulled loose, whickering into the night like a piece of shrapnel. The bike canted towards the crowd. Billy leaned towards it, trying to grab Gordon's arm, but couldn't reach. The ride seemed to get faster.

Now Gordon wasn't panicking, he was scared to death. Being afraid of heights was one thing, but at least you were stationary. He was hurtling around the circuit at a hundred miles an hour, and if he fell he wouldn't fall downwards until he'd stopped flying outwards. Who knew what he might hit before then? Carnival lights flashed by. A patch of sky followed. Then flags. Lights, sky, and flags. Lights, sky, and flags. A swirling vortex that was pulling him toward it. His stomach retched. Billy's hand snagged on the coat sleeve but couldn't hold on. Another screw yanked free.

This was not good. Billy made one last attempt at grabbing the sleeve and was nearly torn off his own bike. A third screw shot into the crowd. Swirling colours. Impish hands. Finally the bracket gave way and Gordon's bike snapped sideways throwing him into the darkness. Billy screamed after him but it was too late. Two tons of flying gargoyle shot through the air and...

Thunk... Wallop...

The wind was knocked out of him and the lights went out. Muffled sounds came from a long way off. The complete absence of pain frightened him, and he was certain he'd broken his neck. Erasmus had told them once about people

and their fragile bone structure. If they broke their neck, or their back, or just about anything it seemed, the world went numb. They would be paralysed from the neck down and not be able to move again. That's what had happened. Erasmus had got him in the end, and he didn't even know it.

Strong arms pulled him back into the world with a thwack... and the lights came on. Billy pushed the adults back and pulled the gargoyle's coat round him.

"Get off him. Get off him. Leave him alone."

He was crying. Someone handed him the cowboy hat that had sailed into the night. A crowd gathered round them, and once Gordon realised that there was nothing broken he noticed the crater he'd made in the soft earth.

A roustabout from the carousel dashed over full of apology, and Billy quickly plopped the hat on Gordon's head. The ride was slowing to a stop and someone was already lifting the stricken bike from its bracket. Snatches of conversation filtered through his mud clogged ears. "...one lucky kid," someone said. "...should have been checked," another added. It was Billy's voice that unblocked his airways though.

"...at least. Then I won't tell my dad." A personal injury lawyer was born.

*

For the rest of the evening they were treated like kings, and apart from not having to dip into their pockets again, Billy negotiated a twenty-five pound out-of-court settlement. He could have probably stuck out for more, but having a gargoyle as your star-witness was a problem. Perry Mason might be able to make a good case using a stone figure, but Kendal Small Claims Court was a different proposition. The old dears who sat on the bench here would curl their toes at the sight of a badly turned collar, never mind a frog clone with a marble streak.

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Twenty-five pounds was more than Billy had owned in his life, and even after sharing it with Gordon it was a princely sum. He had an idea what he could use it for but that was for another day; tonight it was party time. First things first though, after Gordon's brush with death and gravity he was ready for something to eat.

The fair had several snack bars and mobile hotdog stands, but for VIPs of the stature of Billy and Gordon, it had to be the Castle Tea Rooms. This well manicured café had been extended from the back of the castle ruins, and had been seconded to the Kendal Autumn Fair for three nights. That entailed decking it out with colourful posters from the different exhibitors, hanging bunting and flags around the walls, and adding flashing lights more reminiscent of Christmas than late autumn. It also meant changing the menu to accommodate the more adventurous, no more pot-of-tea-with-scone-and-cream, but hotdogs and hamburgers with onions and tomato ketchup. The only nod to the traditional menu was the selection of cakes on offer, and Billy was going to make the most of them.

The carousel first-aider had insisted on checking Gordon out, but Billy managed to deflect him with the promise of no further action. His friend felt okay, and so long as the compensation was agreed there was no need for medical attention. The teenager was surprised at the depth of the crater however, and wondered how Gordon had escaped without injury. As an avid reader of *National Enquirer* he had heard of such things; one man had fallen from the undercarriage of a Jumbo Jet as a block of ice and thawed out unhurt in Salt Lake City, Utah. As he returned to his post behind the control booth he was already drafting his contribution to the next issue.

Hotdogs weren't as bad as Gordon expected, having nothing to do with that pile of poop the old lady picked up, and bearing no resemblance to any part of a dog. Draped in onions and a healthy dollop of Heinz Tomato Ketchup it was

almost as nice as the bacon sandwich he'd eaten for breakfast, and tons better than pigeon.

Billy had a Hawaiian cheeseburger that dribbled down his chin; the pineapple ring so thick he could barely get his mouth round the breadcake it came in. His eyes were gleaming with anticipation at the rest of the night, unaware that it was about to take a turn for the worse.

"After this," Billy said through a mouthful of burger, "We'll check out the stalls."

Gordon nodded, struggling to keep a glut of onions and ketchup from squirting out of the end of his hotdog. Blood-red dollops had already splattered his plate, and he wanted to keep them there, not on his coat.

"It's a good job you're built like a brick..." He didn't finish, not wanting to spoil Gordon's appetite by describing the bodily function that went on in a brick outhouse. "You are all right aren't you?" he asked for the umpteenth time.

Gordon nodded again, simply because he could. The fear that had gripped him as he flew off the bike had been replaced by relief that he could still move his head at all. Being buried two feet in a grassy bank did wonders for your perspective. Most people would have broken their necks after such a fall, so the gargoyle was thankful for once that he was made of stone. Still, the unfortunate accident revealed the upside of human nature once again, people rushing from everywhere to see if he was okay. Also, the financial rewards far outweighed any discomfort he might have felt. He took another bite of the hotdog, splashing more blood on the tablecloth.

"You looked like Superman for a minute there."

"I didn't look at all. I had my eyes closed."

"Have you always been afraid of heights?"

"As long as I can remember."

Billy put his burger down, thinking about that.

"You know, they say if you have a fear you should confront it, then it goes away."

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“Who’s they?”

“I don’t know. I must have heard it somewhere.”

“Well, I’ve spent the last hundred and fifty years on the rooftops of Kendal, and that hasn’t worked. What do you suggest? A rocket ship to Mars?”

“Nothing as high as that,” Billy said, looking through the window at the big wheel.

“What are *you* afraid of?”

The question caught Billy by surprise. As far as he knew he had no phobias. He wasn’t afraid of spiders, or snakes, and he didn’t mind being high up or low down. You could put him in wide-open spaces or cramp him up in a box and it wouldn’t matter to him. He couldn’t swim but he wasn’t frightened of the water, and apart from being burned he wasn’t scared of fire either.

Then he thought about Eastview Children’s Home. Maybe there was one thing he was afraid of, being alone. He had come into this world through the back door, abandoned before he could form any memories of his family. Billy lived life in a cocoon like a man with amnesia, no past to use as a guidepost and no future to speak of. All he knew was what mister Dowker told him, and that wasn’t much. On the threshold of his teenage years he had grown to hate the mother who had done this to him.

“I don’t think you’re scared of being alone,” Gordon said, reading Billy’s mind. “I think you’re afraid of ever finding them. Your parents.”

“What about *your* parents?” Billy said, changing the subject.

This time it was Gordon’s turn to be surprised.

“I told you. I don’t have any.”

“But isn’t there some kind of gargoyle family tree?”

“The only tree I’ve seen is at The Brewery Arts Centre.”

He was avoiding the subject; because he had a sneaking suspicion the boy might have something there. Obviously gargoyles aren’t born, they’re created, so there can’t be a

natural mother or father, but there was a kind of pecking order that replicated the family tree. If there was no family, then at least there was a surrogate family, and in Gordon's case his siblings must be Randolph and Tadpole. As for a father figure, he could only think of... Erasmus. That sent a shiver down his spine because if the Ruskins ever caught him it would be Erasmus' duty to send him to the stoneyard.

"At least we've got each other," Gordon said. "You're as real as any brother I could have. And you pulled me out of the river."

"And the hole in the ground."

"Yes. That as well. Two nil to you."

Billy lifted both hands as if holding a scarf above his head.

"We only sing when we're winning."

The waitress looked across at them, and he shut up.

"Hurry up," he said. "We'll spend some of your compo at the stalls."

*

They didn't have to spend anything of course because they were kings for a day, so the problem wasn't how much they had to spend, but how much could they carry? They were like kids in a candy store, and as often happened, the embarrassment of riches devalued whatever they chose. If you could have anything you wanted, then the fact that you didn't have to wait took away the anticipation, and therefore the joy, when you finally got it.

Billy didn't let that hold him back. By the time they'd been round two souvenir stands and a bric-a-brac stall his arms were so full he needed two carrier bags to carry it all. Gordon was more selective. He found the only thing he wanted on the second-hand stall. He'd leafed through the paperbacks in the hope of finding the Dark Tower books, only managing to find a battered copy of *Darkwater Towers*

Colin Campbell

by Colin Campbell, the derelict block of flats on the cover bearing no resemblance to his personal dark tower. His disappointment was short lived when his eyes fell on the tarnished buckle of the twin gunbelts.

The world faded into the background. He stared in disbelief at the haphazard display, his hands hovering ready to pounce. Sounds became muffled, as if he was underwater again, and the crowd almost slowed to a standstill. Billy was saying something, but Gordon couldn't hear what it was, yet his own breath sounded loud in his ears.

The gunbelts were tooled leather, their chunky square buckle sporting crossed rifles embossed into the metal. A dozen replica shells were slotted into black loops around both hips, and the matching holsters lay like folded arms across the front. Careworn pistol grips protruded from the holsters, and Gordon couldn't resist sliding his hands over them. They felt smooth, and warm, and made to measure.

These pistols were meant for a gunfighter. A pulse ticked in Gordon's ears, the pressure building until his head began to spin, and it wasn't until he drew the weapons that his world steadied. The guns were old, much older than Billy, and the heavy plastic was scratched with years of play. Whichever lucky child had owned these had used them to excess, and the joy he must have felt emanated from them like the heat from a hot water bottle on a cold night. He sensed the love that had been poured over them, and the sense of loss when adulthood killed the spark of adventure.

A rumble of thunder brought Gordon back to the present, grumbling across the western hills among clouds that were still hours away. Overhead the sky was dark and clear, but a chill had entered the evening. The pistol grips warmed his hands, and he was reluctant to let them go. He twirled them around his fingers, first forwards then back, slotting them expertly in their holsters then drawing them again. Clint Eastwood couldn't have done it any better. Or Roland of Gilead, the last gunslinger. The world moved as if wading

through treacle, the voices around him muddled whispers on the still night air. Then one voice forced its way out of the crowd.

“Do you want them?” Billy asked for the third time. “Hello. Earth to Gordon. Are you receiving?” He waved a hand in front of Gordon’s eyes. “Do you want to get them?”

Did he? You bet.

“Yes,” he said, unable to trust his voice. “Yes please.”

The man behind the counter picked them up.

“Do you want a bag?”

“No thank you. I’ll put them on.”

The guns were handed over, and Gordon slipped the belt round his waist, snapping the buckle and settling the holsters over each hip. They fit like a glove, as if they’d been waiting for him all these years. Somewhere in Kendal a grown-up had just lost his past, and Gordon wondered if he’d felt it slip away?

“I was beginning to wonder if you’d find anything you wanted?” Billy said from behind the carrier bags. “Feeling a bit guilty.”

“You don’t have anything to feel guilty about,” Gordon said. “These are all I’ve ever wanted.”

He drew both pistols then re-holstered them. Draw. Re-holster. Draw. Re-holster. His hands moved with a familiarity that was uncanny, fast and smooth and deadly. Finally he pointed one pistol at a coconut shy across the path and squeezed the trigger. It was fully loaded and the gentle squeeze loosed off a... steady stream of water. The water-pistol hit its target with such force that if the shy hadn’t been rigged it would have knocked it clean off.

Armed and dangerous, they moved off. It was time to confront Gordon’s fears.

*

Colin Campbell

The big wheel wasn't so much big as humongous. It was the tallest thing Gordon had ever seen and he didn't relish going up in it at all. Billy stood beside him and looked up. It was two years since he'd been in a big wheel, and that one had been a good deal smaller than this, but the exhilaration he'd felt tickled his stomach even now. He couldn't understand how anyone could be frightened of such an exciting thing but when he glanced at Gordon's face a twinge of guilt furrowed his brow.

"You don't have to go on it if you don't want to."

The gargoyle looked skywards, the metal structure seeming to climb forever until it scraped the heavens. Having agreed to try it he knew there was no going back. A gunslinger didn't back down, but he touched the pistols for support all the same. The warmth of the grips crept up his arms, filling his heart with a strength of purpose he might not have otherwise displayed. His own personal Dark Man confronted him on the dusty streets of Laredo – his fear of heights – and he was going to face him down or die trying. This was High Noon and the clock was ticking.

"I'll go on it," he said, lighting a cigarette to calm his nerves. He coughed.

They joined the queue, and waited for the huge metal wheel to finish its ride. Carnival music blared into the night, brightly coloured lights painting the faces in front of them with splashes of orange and red. Children clung tight onto their parents' legs, and teenagers cuddled their girlfriends. The little old lady who had almost broken Gordon's neck on the dodgems held her granddaughter's hand at the front of the queue. Candyfloss and fried onion smells drifted across the fair, only this time they made Gordon's stomach do a lazy flip instead of making him feel hungry. Right now he doubted if he would ever eat again, even if he did survive.

Waiting was the worst part, Gordon thought. If he could have quickly climbed aboard and got it over with his courage might have held up, but the longer he waited the more he

wanted to run. Billy put his carrier bags on the floor, and put a reassuring arm around Gordon's shoulder. It calmed him slightly but not much. There were bigger things at stake here than simple fear of heights. This was the bogeyman who had haunted him all his life and the single biggest stumbling block to being a good gargoyle. Petrol fumes and the pigeon droppings were mere trifles compared to this.

The ride went on and on, its music grating in his ears beneath the cowboy hat. The lights were giving him a headache, the inane chatter of the people around him making him want to shut them up. Tension built gradually until he was like a high-tension wire charged with enough electricity to frazzle the hair right off your head. He began to grind his teeth. Even Billy was getting on his nerves, and the more he asked if Gordon was all right the more he wanted to scream at him.

The motor changed gears and began to slow down, the music signing off abruptly when the roustabout lifted the gate on the first gondola. A loving couple stepped off arm in arm, chattering and smiling as they headed for the next ride. The old lady and her granddaughter climbed in, the man slamming the safety bar down across their legs. A clank from the gears made Gordon jump then the gondola moved on one space. A pair of teenagers got off and another pair replaced them. The safety bar clanged and the gondola moved on. Gordon's breath came in shallow bursts and his heart raced. He watched the ritual eat away at the queue in front of him.

Gate open and riders disembark.

Gordon felt his chest tighten...

New riders climb on, and the safety bar slams down.

His breath stuck in his throat...

Queue steps forward, and the gondola moves on.

The pulse in his temple began to thump like a base drum...

With each cycle he moved closer to his destiny.

Colin Campbell

Gate open; safety bar down; gondola moves forward; start again. Gate; safety bar; gondola; again. Gate; safety bar; gondola; again. Gate; safety bar; gondola; again. The queue dwindled as each gondola was filled, and the nearer he got to the front the more he felt sick. Billy touched his arm, and it was all he could do not to yank it away. They were at the front of the queue now, and Gordon knew he couldn't go through with it. Forget about being the last gunslinger and forget about conquering his fear, the dark man who confronted him was more powerful than he could ever imagine. The sheer size of the wheel dwarfed all around it, and there was no way on God's earth he was going up in that thing.

Yes you are, a voice whispered in his ear. *Because if you don't you will never be able to hold your head up again. You will be an outcast among your kind, and a leper to your friends. I know.* The voice was familiar but he couldn't place it, then he brushed his ear as if a fly had buzzed past and the voice was gone. He looked at the towering structure before him, a nemesis of gigantic proportions. The roustabout gestured him forward but he was rooted to the spot. Billy reneged.

"We don't have to go on if you don't want to."

Gordon gritted his teeth and stared at his opponent, fingers hovering over the smooth grips of his pistols. *Draw you rascally varmint,* he challenged, then stepped into the gondola. Billy joined him but the gargoyle barely registered his presence. Cold steel clamped his legs, and the carriage jerked forward one place, swinging free as they waited for each successive gondola to be filled. They moved forward one space, then two, then three. By the time the wheel was full they were sitting halfway up the night sky, nothing but a wooden floor and a chrome safety bar between them and oblivion. Faces the size of toy soldiers looked up from the crowd below and he was sure they were sneering at him.

A clank of the gears and the entire structure shuddered but Gordon fought his instinct to grab the rail. Music started up from the roustabout's kiosk. The engine noise changed pitch. One final jerk then the wheel began to move, and for a moment Gordon thought time had gone into reverse because their gondola slid backwards towards the ground. The music blasted into his ears as they passed the kiosk then they were swept upwards in one continuous movement, flowing like an escalator with seats. The gondola kept on rising, passing the dodgems' canopy then up higher than the carnival tent. The breeze whistled past his ears and brushed his face then they were level with the castle ramparts and beyond. Still they kept climbing. Dark trees rustled in the wind below them, and he looked out across Kendal as if he were flying.

Fear cramped every muscle in his body, contorting his face into a grin that was partly relief at not dying yet, but mostly dread at when he would. The gondola reached the apex then whooshed down, lifting his stomach into his mouth, and the ground raced up to claim them. He forced himself to keep his eyes open, watching the ground while bracing for impact. The wheel kept turning, their gondola missing the ground then sweeping up again. This time the breeze felt good on his cheeks, and the trees vanishing behind him seemed less dangerous. Up past the ramparts and over the top again. His stomach adjusted and down they went, one continuous movement that encompassed everything in his life. Rock bottom to top of the world. High life to low down. The circle kept turning and the world moved on. The roulette wheel kept spinning and nobody knew where it would stop. Would it be high or would it lay him low?

The only certainty was that the fear that had gripped him had diminished, not gone altogether, but faded like the headache that only tickled his temples now. The rooftops of Kendal were miles below him, accentuated by the height of the wheel and the fact that it was on top of the hill

Colin Campbell

overlooking the Auld Grey Town. Why had he been afraid of the minuscule heights of those toy-town buildings? From here they looked no bigger than the doll's house on the bric-a-brac stall.

Another change in the engine noise signalled the end of the ride, and to his surprise Gordon was sorry to see it go. He wasn't brave enough to say, "Let's have another go," but he was getting there. His greatest fear, the ghost that had ruled his life, had become nothing more than a man in a white cloth. No ghost. No monster. Just a fear of the dark that only needed the light turning on. As if to accentuate that, when the wheel stopped turning they were on top of the world, and that's just how Gordon felt as they waited to be released.

What a pity the evening couldn't have ended there, but it didn't.

*

Gordon could see that Billy was tired by the time they reached the ground, but there was time for one last go round the fair before bed. Gordon on the other hand was high as a kite having survived a confrontation with his deepest fear, and was sad that the evening was drawing to a close. He swung from the hip as he drew his pistols, picking off bad guys like ducks in a shooting gallery, his fingers fanning the hammers in a blur of movement that would have put Stephen King to shame. The last gunslinger might be searching for The Dark Man but Gordon had found his and defeated him. Roland of Gilead eat your heart out.

Billy held the carrier bags close to his chest, and wondered how he was going to smuggle this little lot into Eastview Children's Home. He decided to keep half beneath the sheets of his bed, and hide the rest in the cupboard under the stairs. Not many of the children looked under there, afraid of the dark as much as Gordon had been afraid of heights, and he was thankful that some fears could work in your

favour. The only one he had to watch out for was Tudge McKenzie.

That slobbering mutant didn't seem to be frightened of anything, taking great delight in tormenting Billy at every opportunity. Tudge was three years older than him and first in line for resettlement once he reached sixteen, but that was still a year away so he had to suffer the great lummoX for a while longer. Eastview's resident bully didn't work alone, having his own gang of trainee mutants to help him, and unfortunately they all went to the same school – when they could be bothered. Getting back into the home was easy – Mr Dowker would have settled down with the adult channel on satellite – but avoiding Tudge would be more difficult. He was pondering that when Gordon screamed with delight.

Roland of Gilead might favour a pair of six-guns but John Wayne preferred a Winchester repeating rifle, and for Gordon this was his lucky night. His hands tickled the pistol grips, but his eyes bugged out when he saw the shooting gallery. Six rifles lay across the wooden counter while a row of cartoon ducks trundled from right to left along the back wall of the makeshift tent. The huckster yelled his sales pitch to deaf ears, most of the people passing by already winding down for the evening. The stall was empty, all six rifles ready and available. A display of cheap prizes stood undepleted on one side.

Gordon climbed the step in front of the counter so he could see over the top, and examined the air rifle at the far end. It wasn't a Winchester but whoever designed it knew just what one looked like because these babies looked just like John Wayne's preferred weapon, even down to the repeating action beneath the trigger guard. The huckster saw his chance of one last killing for the night.

"Pound for five shots. Ten for one-fifty." He rattled a box of pellets. "Four ducks gets you a cuddly toy. Six hits the jackpot. Choose anything you want."

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Billy stepped up beside Gordon and the huckster saw his chance slip away.

“Oh,” he said, all the bounce gone from his voice. “You’re the kid that fell off the carousel aren’t you? How many you want?”

“How many?” Billy asked Gordon.

“Ten please.”

The huckster opened the top breach and poured the pellets in, careful not to give him even one over the ten. Keeping the rifle pointed down the range he yanked the trigger guard down once to cock it then handed it back to Gordon.

“Same applies. Four for a cuddly toy and six for... Whatever.”

The ducks speeded up as the man stepped to one side. He may have lost interest in the loss-making customer, but not enough to let him have an easy ride. With the targets moving faster he disappeared round the back to start packing up. Gordon didn’t mind. Just handling Big John’s weapon was good enough for him. Anything he hit would be a bonus.

Billy put the bags down, leaned against the counter, and watched.

Gordon hefted the rifle in his hands to gauge the balance, then rested one forearm on the planking and sighted along the barrel. He pushed his hat back from his eyes then slipped his finger round the trigger. The ducks trundled on. He squinted down the range, excitement and tension running through his veins in equal measure. The rifle trailed a battered yellow bird as it came up from the right, following it along the track. His finger curled round the trigger and began to squeeze. The duck trembled. Gordon held his breath. The finger tensed then... *phutt, ting*.

The duck was knocked down with a bang. Billy applauded.

“Yeehah.”

Gordon selected another, and trailed it with the rifle. *Phutt, ting*. Enemy down.

Billy bounced with excitement, tiredness forgotten.

“Go get ’em.”

Another duck. *Phutt...* Missed.

That was two out of three. Billy gripped the edge of the counter and waited for Gordon to sight again. He was so intent on urging his friend on that he didn’t see the hulking figure come up behind him.

“What’s up Ringworm? Got ants in yer pants?”

Billy spun round. Tudge McKenzie stood with three of his cronies, slamming a fist into his open palm and jutting his chin out.

“That’s Rinkfield,” Billy said, trying to disguise the fear in his voice. He wasn’t afraid of the oversized bully or the three heavies he always had with him – beatings were something he’d got used to during his stay at Bleak House, and not always from the other residents – but he didn’t want to sour Gordon’s day with an unpleasant scene.

“What’s in the bags?”

Tudge moved forward. The Three Stooges kept station just behind him, fanning out on either side in case of trouble. They didn’t see anything here Tudge couldn’t handle, especially if they held the squirt down while he got his kicking. Billy pushed the bags behind him with one foot. Gordon laid the rifle on the counter and moved to one side.

“Nothing for you.”

Billy glanced round for any adults who could stop this before it began. The shooting gallery had suddenly become a quiet backwater, what remained of the crowds moving silently towards the castle. Even the huckster was nowhere to be seen. A gentle breeze had sprung up, and somewhere in the distance a second rumble of thunder growled in the throat of the night.

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“You couldn’t judge a fudge contest if there was only one piece... Tudge.”

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Tudge bridled at the tone of voice and squared his shoulders. The other three spread round the sides in a pincer movement.

“Billy Ringworm. You seem to be forgetting your place, and that place is at Eastview because nobody else wants you.”

That stung. Billy recoiled as if slapped across the face.

Gordon was boiling inside but kept quiet. His eyes flicked from Tudge to the hombre on his right, then across at the other two who were sidling towards Billy on the left. Even the shortest of them was taller than Billy, but Tudge towered over him. Gordon weighed the prospects, measuring distances and angles. His friend was in trouble, and there was only one thing to do.

“Then why are you there?” Gordon said, stepping away from the counter to give himself more room. “If you are in such demand?”

Tudge’s face ran through a comical gamut of expressions. Surprise that someone dare speak to him like that, then stupidity as he deciphered what the midget had said, and finally dumb concentration as he tried to think of something smart to say. He was fighting a losing battle on all three so he reverted to type, and went on the attack.

“Who’s talking to you, smudge face?”

“You are.” Gordon’s hands hovered over the pistols. “You mess with my brother, you mess with the entire family.” Something else he’d picked up from a film on TV. He didn’t think water was going to do the trick here though.

“Tough words from a...” Tudge sniffed the air. “I didn’t know they piled shit that high.”

Shit was one of his favourite words, and he used it to excess. He hadn’t plucked up courage to use the “F” word in public, saving that for practice sessions in front of the mirror. The other three filtered to Tudge’s right, ignoring Billy and zoning in on this latest threat. Gordon took two paces away from the gallery, drawing them even further out of position.

Tudge followed him, and Billy realised what Gordon was doing.

The bags were forgotten. Billy was forgotten. Tudge McKenzie had acquired a new target and he sized him up. Short. Squat. Ugly. Maybe even younger than Billy Rinkfield. In true bully fashion he weighed the odds and liked them, realising he was two feet taller and twice as heavy, with fists like hams. Add to that he had three heavies to hold the little toad down, and the odds were looking good. Ringworm could wait.

“Nice paint job. Pity you smudged it. At least it’ll hide the bruises.”

Tudge slammed one fist into his open palm twice for emphasis, then was startled when the runt moved towards him.

Billy watched and waited. Tudge had his back to him, and the other three were on the far side nearest Gordon. The fist slapped palm, and the gargoyle made his move. Without being noticed Billy darted behind the bully, getting on all fours just as Gordon ducked beneath Tudge’s haymaker swing. The combination of surprise that he was being attacked and the momentum of the missed blow forced him to take a step back, and his legs stumbled into Billy’s side. Gordon charged, head down and whacked Tudge in the stomach. The giant grunted, tried to regain his balance, but it was too late. He was going down. The ground shook as he landed like a felled tree, and Gordon swung his fist in a hammer blow to the stomach for good measure. The wind whooshed out of the bully’s slack-jawed mouth. It felt as if he’d been hit by a piece of stone. Billy scooted out from under him.

Gordon spun round and stepped aside but he needn’t have bothered. There was no counter-attack from the rear because the three dumplings were gobsmacked. Nobody had ever set about Tudge, and they weren’t sure what to do.

“Get ’em,” the stricken bully yelled.

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They snapped into action, zeroing in on Gordon as the greatest threat. Fists flying they waded in and discovered just how hard a gargoyle can be. The first two heavies slammed blows into Gordon's body then screamed with pain as their fingers crunched stone. The third thought better of it but Gordon was already going after him. A sweeping leg strike took the legs from under him, and he banged both elbows on the ground.

Now Tudge was back up and furious. He forgot about the weight of the blow, and caught Gordon by surprise, the roast ham fist slamming into the runt's stomach with all the effort he could muster. The gargoyle rocked back under the blow but it was Tudge who screamed at the night sky, cradling his broken fist like a newborn baby. It was time to put this game to bed.

"Rifle," Gordon yelled.

Billy reached the counter before the rest knew what was happening. He slapped the rifle butt, and the Winchester spun through the air in a graceful arc. Gordon caught it and reloaded in one smooth action. *Phutt...*

"Ouch."

The nearest bully grabbed his cheek. Reload. *Phutt...*

"Ouch," again.

He'd had enough, and bolted for the exit. Gordon swung the barrel toward number two. *Phutt... phutt...* in quick succession, and he followed the first. The third bully didn't wait for his turn, galloping after them.

Tudge's eyes were streaming, anger and pain filling them with equal measure, but it was humiliation that hurt him the most. The gunslinger reloaded the Winchester and loosed off three quickfire shots. *Phutt... phutt... phutt...* The first one caught Tudge in the chest, but the other two spanked his backside as he turned tail and ran. Gordon kept firing even though the phutts were just air, his ten shots spent. Apart from one duck, he'd hit the target every time, and if that didn't deserve the jackpot he didn't know what did.

The jackpot tonight was friendship, and for that Gordon didn't need the huckster. Tudge had been wrong when he said nobody wanted Billy Rinkfield. Gordon wanted him. And that was good enough.

Chapter Seven

Gordon arranged to meet Billy later for the fireworks display, but the Ruskins got him long before that. After the excitement of the fair, and a day that had started at dawn, Billy needed a rest before topping it off with Kendal's pyrotechnics. He went back to Eastview Children's Home safe in the knowledge that Tudge McKenzie wouldn't bother him again. That only left Mr Dowker to worry about when he snuck back in. Gordon headed for the library.

Huge pillars loomed tall, the orange streetlamps throwing angled shadows into the recesses, and hiding the main door. Above the pillars a mock Roman fresco stood out in the light, its stark reliefs timely reminders of Gordon's lineage. The windows were dark. Nobody home. As he crossed Stricklandgate he was overcome with a sense of freedom that he had never felt before, the feeling that he could roam a world of landscapes *or* roofscapes, and be at home in either. There were still a few people about but nobody paid any attention to him, his disguise complete, and the clothes now a second skin. Even the shoes had stopped irritating his square-toed feet.

He went up the front steps and looked at the heavy wooden doors that had been locked since six o'clock. One day he would walk through them and choose a book in the same way as anybody else, using a library card granted by the Westmorland Borough Council. Then he would know

he'd arrived in the real world. Until then it was the back door for him, or more precisely the skylight. He walked round the back and climbed the stairs where he had first met Billy, and the memory warmed his heart.

Despite coming from completely different backgrounds, not to mention different races, the two got on famously. Perhaps it was their lack of family that drew them together, or an adventurous spirit that would not accept the restraints of only one world. Whatever it was they were closer than many brothers who were joined by blood. There were parallels in their lives that continued even now, and as Gordon slipped round the back of the library Billy was slipping round the back of Eastview Children's Home.

Gordon reached the half-landing and started towards the fire door then stopped. His ears twitched beneath the cowboy hat and he sniffed the air. It was pitch-black round here, the streetlights failing to penetrate a world that was neither for ground-dwellers or roofscapers. A sort of halfway house. Someone was watching him. To the north, the Parish Church of St Thomas jutted into the night sky, and for some reason the sight of it made him shiver. Up ahead the green door was closed, the flat edge of the roof standing out against the orange smear of night above the town centre. The air was still and quiet.

He took the hat off and rubbed his ears. It was beginning to feel uncomfortable so he hung it round his neck on the drawstring, forming a darker circle on the already dark coat. He hitched the gun belts over his hips and scratched his bottom then lit a cigarette. Red fire glowed in the dark and the smoke calmed his nerves. It also made him cough fit to burst his lungs, but that was the price you paid for being a rebel. The books were in here somewhere, and finding them at WH Smith had rekindled his interest. Stephen King awaited.

Onto the roof now, and he felt a strange hollowness, like arriving home after all the furniture had been removed. It was

Colin Campbell

still home but different. Not yours any more. He waited until he'd finished the cigarette then flicked it expertly into the wheely-bin at the bottom of the fire escape. An explosion of sparks foreshadowed the larger display tonight, followed by the faintest wisp of smoke then it was gone. He climbed the peaked roof with newfound confidence, the building nowhere near as tall as the top of the fairground wheel, then down the other side into the V. The skylight stood black and empty against the slope.

He paused again, goose bumps rippling along the back of his neck. Was that a sound he heard? Would he need to draw down on the man in black as he came round the gully? A ruffle of wings and the soft coo of pigeons came from the deep shadows. Gordon drew both guns, his hands blurs in the darkness, and loosed off two shots. Twin streams squirted into the corner and the pigeons exploded into the air. Gotcha. Two feathers drifted down. He holstered the guns and turned to the skylight.

The burglars had taken half an hour chewing wood with their jemmy but if there was one thing a gargoyle knew how to do it was open a window. Spending the last hundred and fifty years among the rooftops of Kendal taught you that. He leaned forward, locating the catch through the glass, then gently tapped the window in a steady rhythm that became almost a hum. The vibration tickled his teeth, and the hum climbed the scale until it was musical. The catch shivered, then climbed the bolt, and eventually popped with a faint ting.

As he opened the window the moon crawled up the night sky, peering down from behind the church, its wicked blue-white light glinting off the glass. A quick glance over his shoulder, and a reassuring touch of the pistol grips, then he was inside.

*

Billy had less trouble getting into Eastview, but his Spidey senses were on full alert by the time he emerged from the bushes. The kitchen extension jutted out at the rear of the home. It was eight forty-five and the television blared from the night office, covering Billy's crash through the foliage as he tripped over a root. The roses in the flower border snagged his clothes and hands, drawing blood, and as with most of his young life so far he fell into a bed of roses and came up smelling of manure.

If there was one constant in Billy Rinkfield's life it was that if something could go wrong it would, and if there was nothing to go wrong then God would find something. That had been the case on the three occasions he'd been fostered out, calamities ranging from setting the dinner on fire to flooding the bathroom finding him with unerring accuracy. Coupled with his introspective nature, and the conviction that nobody wanted him anyway, this had the effect of rendering him unplaceable. Once he'd crept past that magical age of five there were few families willing to put up with him, and he was on his way to becoming institutionalised. Maybe his teenage years would be better but Billy doubted it. The only light on his horizon was Gordon.

He picked himself up, brushed himself down, then watched for movement in the office window. One of the part-time care workers was on duty tonight, so he didn't expect any trouble, but he waited a few minutes anyway. Better safe than sorry. With no sign of movement from the office he crossed the flower border, and rounded the extension. Billy's room was on the first floor at the back, but he never used the fire escape that ran from the car park. That would be too easy, and he believed that if something was too good to be true, then it probably was. He imagined Mr Dowker waiting behind one of the windows scouring the staircase.

No. It was safer to climb the drainpipe onto the kitchen roof then into his window at the far corner. That way there were only two windows that overlooked him, the second-

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floor landing window, and the first-floor toilets. Mr Dowker's flat was on the far side of the building, and since he wasn't on duty that's where he would be. Billy fastened the carrier bag handles on his belt and began to climb.

This was when he always felt at his most Spiderman-like. If he only had the webslinger's patent web guns he could swing up there in one smooth movement, but he had to make do with the drainpipe. The bags banged against his knees as he climbed, and he had to hike them over the lip before clambering into a sitting position on the flat roof. His legs were dangling over the side when the Spidey senses prickled his neck.

He snapped his head towards the toilet window but there was no movement. No shifting of the shadows in the darkened room. The landing window next. Nothing. He rubbed his neck but the feeling persisted, and he sidled along the roof on his bottom until he was up against the wall. From the safety of the deeper shadows he quartered the north wall, squinting into the gloom for any sign of life. There were no other windows, and the roofscape was as bare as Kojak's head. Satisfied he got to his feet and crept towards his room.

The window was open one notch, and he flicked the catch, dropping the bags over the windowsill. He pulled himself in then closed the curtains. He didn't turn the light on straight away; peering through the window first to make sure nobody was following him. Satisfied, he walked along the invisible path between his furniture to the door. Halfway across he stopped dead. Spidey senses on full alert.

He wasn't alone.

The carrier bags crackled as they settled on the floor but they couldn't disguise the rasping breath coming from the bedside chair. The lamp clicked on and a hairy wrist extended from the switch. Mr Dowker grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"Now, what have you been taking this time?"

*

The interior of the library was dark but Gordon's night-vision kicked in straight away. After a lifetime on the rooftops of Kendal he was used to darker places than this, and the first-floor reference library was no problem at all. A stone-carved balcony overlooked the main library, a maze of bookshelves fanning out like spokes from the central desk. An ornate chandelier on a heavy-duty chain hung above the desk like the sword of Damocles, and the returns counter stood near the double doors. A rack of newspapers and magazines stood next to the desk.

Gordon looked down, waiting for the familiar nausea and dizziness, and felt a rush of freedom fill his heart. Despite the drop from the balcony he felt no fear, the ghost of his vertigo put to the sword on the fairground's big wheel. Put to the gun. He fingered the pistol grips with loving care, and was about to jump down onto the nearest bookcase when a feathery movement caught his eye. Somewhere off to his left a shadow flickered across the ceiling followed by the faintest jangle of keys.

Moonlight filtered through the battery of windows high up along the northern wall, frosting the tops of the bookshelves with pale blue light. They looked like snowy bridges across a deadly chasm, each one placed just far enough from the next to make passage difficult but not impossible.

The movement stopped and the room was silent again. Gordon gazed into the darkness, checking the shadows for signs that he wasn't alone. After the barrage of movement at the fair his mind found it difficult to readjust to the silent world where he'd lived before, the world of skylights and roofscapes. He saw nothing.

Where was *The Dark Tower*? That was the question Roland of Gilead asked, but the answer was more immediate for Gordon, not the tower itself but the books about it. The fiction section was subdivided into genres. What category

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had they filed the Dark Tower series under? Fiction, under Stephen King? Horror, because of Stephen King? Or Fantasy, because it wasn't traditional Stephen King? Gordon was pondering that when the keys jangled again.

His senses snapped into action. Now he knew he wasn't alone, and that could only mean one thing. The Ruskins had found him. Someone must have seen him, although how they'd recognised the gun-toting cowboy in the Stetson he didn't know. He toyed with the idea of drawing his pistols but there were no targets, the sounds coming from everywhere and nowhere. The huge bowl of the library acted like a megaphone, amplifying the noise while spreading it around the walls, not so much an echo as a reverb.

Danger lit a fuse inside him, sparking through his system like a thousand fireworks. Adrenaline pumped up his volume until he was tighter than a publisher on royalties day. The keys again. Only they weren't keys at all. Too late he realised his mistake and snapped his head towards the chandelier chain. It was swarming with Ruskins, their pointy little heads bobbing up and down as they scrambled from the ceiling. Dozens of them. Gordon turned back to the skylight but more of the little pests were pouring out of the night.

Cornered. Below him the maze of bookshelves shone in the moonlight, pointing the way. Without hesitation he dropped onto the General Fiction shelf and raced across the silvered path. Screeches of disappointment sounded from behind him but he was already leaping onto the Horror section, darting left towards the northern windows. The Cyclops eye of the moon stared down, pointing the way out. He was spurred on by the gentle thud, plop, thud, plop of the Ruskins dropping down behind him, the chandelier swaying under their weight to his right.

Clink, jangle... They jumped from the massive light fitting. Thud, plop, thud, plop. The little monsters padded along the Fantasy aisle towards him. He dodged right onto Romantic Fiction, then left again onto Westerns. The snap-

toothed varmints tried to head him off at the pass but he was too quick for them. He reached the wall with seconds to spare and clambered up like a scolded cat. The middle window was partly open, and his hands scrambled for the catch.

That's when the trappings of the ground-dwellers let him down. The ill-fitting shoes neutered his feet, and he couldn't get a grip. His fingers, still encased in soft leather gloves, did their best but as he clung to the windowsill his hands began to slip out of them. Below him the Ruskins snapped at his heels like a pack of hungry dogs, then he saw the rest of them scurrying along the gutter outside the windows.

Fall or climb?

The decision was taken for him as the moon was blotted out, and an army of tiny hands pulled him into the cold night air.

*

Mr Dowker slapped the leather belt into one hand just as Tudge McKenzie had thumped his palm.

"I said what have you been taking this time?"

The tone was pleasant but the voice dripped with menace. Billy shielded the carrier bags with his legs, pushing them back with one foot. This was the first time the head warden had waited in his room. The belt was familiar, holding its own memories, but this change of tactics was worrying. Was nowhere safe any more? Had privacy been removed from the inmates' dictionary? If so then this was the last straw because Billy was a very private person. With no friends or family to speak of it was the only way to survive in a cold stark world, keep yourself to yourself, and lock your innermost secrets deep inside. That was why he always kept his personal things hidden beneath the bedclothes, away from prying eyes. Now it seemed that wasn't enough.

"Just freebies from the fair."

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“There are no freebies at the fair. They run a business the same as anyone else, and it ain’t good business to give everything away.”

“Prizes and stuff, you know.”

“I do not know. And you couldn’t win a prize if you bought every ticket.”

On present evidence that was exactly right, otherwise how come out of all the children’s homes in Cumbria he got stuck in this one? In the tombola of life Billy had drawn a losing number. He knew where this was leading, and it didn’t matter if he had receipts for everything in the bags, or a citation from the Queen. The belt was going to bite anyway.

“Pass the bags over here.”

Mr Dowker held out his free hand. The palm was red from slapping the belt, and Billy wondered if he enjoyed whipping himself more than the boys? It seemed a strange concept but not impossible. With Mr Dowker nothing was beyond the realms of possibility.

“NOW...”

Billy jumped, and he fought back tears that were forming behind his eyes. The world was full of bullies, and not all of them were children. It suddenly became important to stand up for himself. If he didn’t he would have to put up with this for the rest of his life, maybe not from Mr Dowker, or Tudge McKenzie, but from somebody. Gordon had stood up for him against Tudge and look how that lumbering oaf had turned tail and ran. It was time to do it for himself.

“It’s mine. Leave it alone.”

The belt whipped out like a wet towel in the showers, snapping inches in front of Billy’s face. Mr Dowker’s eyes grew dark, angry furrows creasing his brow.

“Boy. If you know what’s good for you, you had better pass them bags over here right now.”

In Billy’s mind, Tudge McKenzie stood before him, the archetypal schoolyard bully. Mr Dowker was just another incarnation of him, the bully no one had ever stood up to.

After tonight's skirmish there was hope for Tudge, but it was too late for Mr Dowker. Maybe if someone had resisted when the caretaker was a boy he would never have reached this stage. Tonight a twelve-year-old was drawing a line in the sand.

"No."

The belt snapped again, this time catching Billy's leg. The pain was red-hot but he stood his ground. This was put-up-or-shut-up time. He knew he would take a beating anyway, but this time it wouldn't be one-sided. He picked the bags up and held them defiantly across his chest. The belt flashed out and ripped the plastic, spilling the guts of his possessions onto the floor. Billy tried to catch them but there were too many, and as he dropped his guard the warden struck. Hairy arms grabbed his coat-sleeve and yanked him forward. Billy overbalanced, tumbling at Mr Dowker's feet, and the beating began.

Fairground novelties scattered across the carpet as the other bag tipped over, toy soldiers with dead eyes watching in horror. A jigsaw puzzle of Lake Windermere spewed from its box, and an Airfix model plane crunched under the bully's shoe. The belt rose and fell again and again, raising welts across Billy's back and shoulders. But he was right, this time it wasn't one-sided. Before he lay broken and crying he scratched Mr Dowker's face hard, marking him for life.

Once the ordeal was over, and the bully had left, Billy gathered his belongings and put them in the remaining carrier bag. They didn't amount to much; three Spiderman Comics, an Action Man with a broken shoulder, two Hot Wheels racing cars, and a sparkly yo-yo he had never mastered.

He looked around the wreckage of his bedroom and felt no sadness at leaving. From now on he would live on the rooftops of Kendal with his only friend, Gordon the Gargoyle, and if that didn't sit right with some people, then hard luck. He climbed out of the window onto the flat roof of the kitchen extension and headed for the library.

Chapter Eight

Gordon wasn't at the library. He had been taken to a much darker place, a part of Kendal he'd avoided over the last hundred and fifty years. The Parish Church of St Thomas watched over the Auld Grey Town like the father figure it was. Now his own father figure would pass sentence there, and order his expulsion from life as a gargoyle. The stoneyard was out of sight across the river, but its presence dominated the proceedings as surely as Erasmus did himself.

Gordon reached the ramparts on the south transept and paused, afraid to go on until a sharp prod in the back got him moving again. Nasty little giggles bubbled behind him, and his gaolers' tridents glinted in the moonlight. He could have kicked a few Ruskins off the rampart but what was the point? There were dozens of the little beggars flanking him across the rooftops. Erasmus and the town council awaited, and would not be denied.

Clambering along the edge of the roof Gordon passed three gargoyles near the flagstaff. They ignored him, their spouts pointing outwards from the building in Royal salute. The King was in residence. The head honcho. The big cheese. Erasmus. None of the church gargoyles were going to risk a word of encouragement so close to their leader. Most of them thought Gordon was getting what he deserved anyway. The Ruskins climbed over the peaked roof and slid down the other side, not even watching Gordon any more;

only a fool would try to escape now, and as foolish as he'd been they knew he wasn't stupid.

A square of light shone onto the roof above the vestry, and the line of miniature orcs filed through the open window. Gordon paused on the threshold of the council chamber, wishing he could have a cigarette. The chanting inside forced him to get his mind on the job, because nobody would defend him unless he did it himself. He took a deep breath and ducked through the entrance.

Inside the loft space the council was in session. Weathered oak beams criss-crossed the room, and tea chests had been arranged around the edges forming tiered seating. Candles flickered in the breeze from the window, throwing dancing shadows across the roof lathes and making the joists twist and squirm. The place would make anyone twist and squirm, and Gordon's stony flesh rippled with goose bumps. The seats were full; a sea of nameless faces disappearing into the gloom.

A battered desk with a high-backed chair stood in the middle of the room, and in front of that, a footstool. Two of the fiercest gargoyles Gordon had ever seen stood either side of the footstool, their gnarled faces and horned shoulders the things of nightmares.

Erasmus stood behind the chair staring into space; a magnificent winged staff in one hand. He turned at the sound of the commotion and Gordon thought he saw a flicker of sadness on the town elder's face but then it was gone. The stony visage glared down at him as he was led to the footstool. The guards closed ranks. No escape here. Nowhere to go even if he did.

A murmur ruffled through the audience. Erasmus nodded towards the window and it was closed with a bang, sending the candles into a panicky dance. The town elder slammed the staff on the ground twice then sat down. The meeting was called to order and the murmuring ceased. The only sounds

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were the shuffling of bottoms on seats, and the breeze whistling outside. It was a lonely sound.

“Sit,” Erasmus ordered.

Gordon sat on the footstool.

“Gordon of Stricklandgate, you have been brought here to answer charges of the most serious nature. If proved, the council will have no alternative...” The elder looked down at the cowering gargoyle then slammed the staff once.

“Sparrowmire. Call the roll.”

A spindly gargoyle, who looked like a papier-mâché doll, stepped out of the gloom holding a rolled parchment. Sparrowmire unfurled the roll and read from it in a querulous voice.

“In the name of the High Council, and all those here present, I call this meeting to order. The Keepers of the Circle acknowledge thy lineage.” He paused, adding weight to the names Gordon had only heard in whispers.

“Dunmail...”

“Aye.”

“Horncop...”

“Aye.”

“Longpool...”

“Aye.”

“Brock...”

“Aye.”

“As Keepers of the Circle do you undertake to pass fair judgement in the matter of Gordon of Stricklandgate, so help you God?”

“I do,” they chorused.

Another murmur ran around the chamber. Proceedings were open. As Gordon waited on his stool the room closed in, hunkering down for the main event, the execution of the miscreant who sat before them. He tried to breathe normally, desperate for a cigarette, but that wouldn't endear him to the council. Smoking was something else he wasn't allowed to

do. If he was human he could have invoked the European Court of Human Rights but he wasn't, that was the problem.

"Sparrowmire. The charge."

Erasmus hunched forward in his chair, head bowed.

"It is laid before the court that the plaintiff of the first part – namely Gordon of Stricklandgate – did without prior permission or implicit authority, communicate, consort or otherwise have contact with the plaintiff of the second part – namely a ground-dweller of unknown origin – in direct contravention of the Gargoylian Code, and Letters of Our Grandfathers."

This time the murmur was of shock and surprise. The audience had suspected this must be bad for them to be called here but... this was tantamount to treason. There could only be one punishment – the stoneyard – and that chilled their bones. The very thought of sending one of their own to that hellish place was terrible, that the thought might become a reality was frightening.

"How say you?"

Gordon was numb. He sat there and tried to construct a defence, but sitting in his cowboy hat and six-guns it was hard to see what he could say. The trousers and shoes didn't help either, but he didn't think any of that mattered. He had obviously been seen, and his movements reported to Erasmus by those loose-tongued guttersnipes, the Ruskins. In the face of that what defence was there?

"His name is Billy Rinkfield," Gordon said.

"What?" Erasmus looked stunned.

"The ground-dweller of unknown origin. His name is Billy Rinkfield, and even he doesn't know where he came from."

The room was silent, too shocked to respond even with a murmur. Erasmus stared in disbelief.

"You admit it then?"

Something in the elder's voice tugged at Gordon's heart, a tone that spoke louder than any words. It was the voice in his

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mind at the big wheel. A fatherly voice. He suspected that the elder statesman was less happy with a confession than he would have been with a denial. An invisible cord tightened between them, a ley line that was stronger than the poles of the earth. Gordon answered with a question.

“Admit what? That I have spoken to another of God’s creatures? Is that so wrong?”

“It is against the law.”

“I know.”

Gordon bowed his head, gathering himself for the best form of defence. Attack. This was dangerous territory, questioning the beliefs that their civilisation was built upon, arguing against the wisdom of gargoyles ten times his age. Suddenly, being a rebellious youth who smoked simply to annoy his elders seemed like the most foolish thing in the world, but among the foolishness he discovered something of real value. The value of friendship, even if it was with someone outside his own race.

“But he isn’t that much different from me. He’s alone. And he has no family.”

Erasmus was unable to mask the wince.

“I just played with him for a bit.”

The winged staff banged twice and the town father stood up, towering above Gordon on his pathetic footstool. Gordon racked his brain for a convincing argument but everything that sprang to mind sounded like some Hollywood reject, and for once his knowledge of films didn’t throw up any useful quotes. He didn’t think “*There is no Keyser Soze*” would go down well, although when he thought about it the fabrication of Keyser Soze was almost as complete as making the ground-dwellers the villain here. What *was* the problem with mixing with another culture? The words wouldn’t come, so he simply sat mute before the town leader.

“In the history of time there has never been a successful coupling between ground-dwellers and roofscapers,” Erasmus said, and although his voice was raised it seemed to

be directed only at Gordon. Like a fireside chat with nobody else in the room. “They can’t even agree among themselves? Forever squabbling and falling out, dragging race into everything. It is them not us who believe we should be separate.”

A murmur greeted this.

“But does that make it right?” Gordon asked.

“It is right.”

“Because they say it is?”

“Because it is.”

The answer stoked the flames of his rebellion. Surely the Great Circle of Gargoyles could formulate its laws on stronger evidence than that the ground-dwellers thought it was a bad idea?

“I did spend a day with Billy.”

A gasp from the crowd.

“On the ground with all the rest. There were selfish people...” a murmur of agreement, “and cruel people...” almost rapture, “but I also saw goodness down there that was the equal to any goodness up here.” That shut them up. “They are all different, some good and some bad, but no worse than some of the badness across the rooftops of Kendal.” He saw Roman Krol snarling like a rabid dog on the Devil’s Tower. Surely Billy couldn’t come up with anyone as evil as that? “The only difference is that they have blood coursing through their veins, and with *them* blood is the true bond.”

“Is that why this Billy Rinkfield is alone?” Erasmus saw his chance to debunk Gordon’s entire argument. “If blood is the tie that binds, then why has his family deserted him?”

“At least he has a family.”

“Has he?”

“They are born from their kin, not created. Their blood runs deep, not like...”

“Created?” This time Erasmus’ voice lowered, more dangerous than ever. “You think there are no ties between us

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because we are bloodless? That those people down there are better than us because of the world they inhabit? Is that it? Do you want to spend your life in exile from your kin because there is more world on the ground than above it?"

"I... I don't know."

That was the truth. Until now he hadn't considered the consequences of his actions, expulsion from the world of his forefathers, and if that option was open to him would he choose it?

"Do you really think that their lives have more value than ours?"

No answer. Gordon was being worn down by the sheer presence of the town elder, his staff a hammer driving the nails into Gordon's coffin. Suddenly the staff rang out again.

"RECESS."

The candles flickered at the ferocity in his voice. To the guards on either side of him he said, "Bring him." The elder spun on his heels and stalked towards a door that Gordon hadn't noticed. Strong hands lifted the gargoyle bodily and propelled him towards the open door. Blackness seeped into the room. He was thrust through the gap and the door closed behind him, extinguishing all light.

*

Away from the candles, darkness sucked the warmth out of the night. They were in the eaves, a channel that ran along the length of the church, heavy beams above them and chiselled stone beneath. To his right the floor gave way to the expanse of the chancellery, another channel running along the other side. Three ornate chandeliers that put the one in the library to shame hung above the body of the church. Below them rows of silent pews crouched in the shadows, lit only by moonlight filtering through the great north window.

Erasmus' shoulders sagged now that they were out of the council chamber, and he seemed to age before Gordon's

eyes. He led the way through a tangle of roof beams and joists, ducking beneath the one and stepping over the other, then came to a halt near the far end. They were out of earshot of the chamber, and the town elder turned to face his young charge.

“The Ruskins were right to bring you to me. Not because of what you have done, but because you don’t see the danger in it. You are like a child who sees nothing wrong in dashing across the road until the truck hits him. It isn’t the other side of the road that is the problem but crossing it.”

Gordon didn’t understand.

“You make a big thing out of the ground-dwellers’ links with their families, even though this Billy Rinkfield proves those ties are not set in stone. Ours are. There are links that you do not understand because you are young, but the thing you need to know is the link between them and us. Do you think you are the first to cross the barrier? It has been going on for centuries, and has brought nothing but misery. They despise us. More important than that, they fear us.”

The breeze found gaps in the roof; moaning and sighing like a trapped ghost. Erasmus rounded the corner at the end of the walkway and dropped to a ledge overlooking the nave. The pews formed an army ranked across the floor, and in front of it the General inspected his troops from the pulpit. The altar formed a spearhead in front of the massed troops and above it the great north window glowed in the moonlight, a huge circular depiction of all things Christian, and some things that were not.

“Look and learn,” Erasmus said, pointing at the leaded glass images.

Gordon clambered onto the ledge and looked up. The window was massive, the picture it displayed intricate. Across the bottom ground-dwellers looked up in awe at the crucified Christ figure while at the edges their armies defended against... A stab of pain lanced into his side more sharply than the spears lancing into the gargoyles depicted in

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the window. Devilish creatures with pointed ears and snarling fangs clung to the ramparts and were impaled as they attacked the helpless worshippers. In the light from the moon he could see terror in the worshippers' eyes as the creatures of the night came out. The sun dipped behind the cross, highlighting the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the good of mankind, while the gargoyles were the minions of the Devil.

"Now you see what they think of us?"

"But... Surely..."

"No buts, Gordon. The facts are there."

The youngster stared in disbelief that the people he so wanted to be like could be responsible for this abomination. His heart crumbled.

"Billy just isn't like that. He..."

"...is alone." Erasmus stared at him. "They are joined by blood, but that bond is not strong enough in their corrupt world. We are made of sterner stuff, and the tie that binds us is stronger."

Gordon looked up, puzzled.

"We have family, you and I. Just not the same as theirs. The ground-dwellers are born of flesh, but there are lines that join us more firmly. The stone that you are carved from has produced many others over the years. It has been buried in the earth for centuries, joined by ley lines and magnetic forces since the dawn of time. Long before these flesh-eaters roamed the planet. That connection can never be broken, any more than you could break the force of gravity."

The old man's eyes were heavy with sadness. The hand that held the staff so firmly trembled and he almost dropped it. Gordon grabbed for it but Erasmus waved him off. He would not let the symbol of his people drop even unto death, that was his legacy.

"We do not have mothers or fathers but we do have kin. The connection might be eroded with time, but it can never be broken. As you go through life the magnetism will draw

you together and you will be family again, that is our strength. The ground-dwellers start as family then that unit disintegrates. We begin apart and are drawn together. The bond is unbreakable, and more permanent than any ground-dweller's."

Understanding filtered into Gordon's eyes and he wanted to touch the hand that held the staff but couldn't. He stood, frozen by the implications.

"And that is what makes my duty tonight so painful. I had hoped you would argue against your breach. That would have at least given me the option of deferring your punishment. As it is you leave me no alternative."

*

Sentence was passed swiftly. In the flickering light of the candles, ashen faces looked on, as pained by the decision as the town elder himself. Erasmus forced himself to look Gordon in the eye then slammed the staff three times. A gasp went up at the mention of the stoneyard and Gordon's legs almost buckled.

Then it was out into the moonlight, escorted by an army of Ruskins, and the two horned guards. Clouds, which had been bulking against the western sky, now spread their fingers across the moon, and a rumble of thunder heralded the onset of the storm. As Gordon clambered over the rooftops he thought of Billy, and Erasmus, and the tangled web of family.

Chapter Nine

Billy watched the moon hide behind fingers of cloud as the day moved into its final quarter. He was on the library roof. A rumble of thunder signalled the storm that would end the day, and he was unaware of the forces pushing the friends towards a dramatic showdown. He sat in the V of the twin roofs and waited, feeling the welts across his back begin to ache and swell. They would bruise up pretty bad by morning, if he survived until then.

The thunder again, prefaced this time by a flicker of lightning deep inside the banks of cloud. It was typical, Billy thought, that every time there was a firework display in Kendal it rained. He remembered one bonfire when he was a child – it was strange that despite his age he didn't consider himself a child any more, weathered beyond his years as he was. That bonfire was one of the few times he'd felt part of a family because the foster parents who looked after him then came closest to taking him permanently. They lavished attention on him at the pre-fire party, buying him pie and peas followed by toffee apple and Coca-Cola. By the time the fire was lit and the fireworks display prepared it started to spit. The night went downhill from there, torrential rain extinguishing the fire and rendering the fireworks useless. The following day, after Billy fought a boy with Shirley Temple curls, he was returned to the home.

As positive as he tried to be, life had a nasty habit of raining on his parade. Kicking sand in the eyes of the ten-stone weakling and bringing him down to earth. No matter how much he adopted a *this-glass-is-half-full* outlook, when he looked closely the glass was actually empty. The glass was looking empty tonight.

Across the river he could see the lights of the fairground licking Kendal Castle, and rising above it like a behemoth the big wheel continued to turn. For Billy the world kept turning but it always stopped at the bottom, no family, no home, and now it even looked as if his only friend had stood him up. Hugging the bag to his chest he wondered what to do, and decided to give Gordon another twenty minutes and then...

What? Then what? He couldn't go back to Eastview even if he wanted to, and he had all his worldly goods in the carrier bag before him. He did have twenty-five pounds left but that wouldn't take him very far. So, what were his options? He couldn't think straight, and refused to believe that Gordon would just abandon him. There must be something wrong.

The twenty minutes were up and it was time to go. Putting his best foot forward and struggling to see the glass as half full he took the only course left to him. If Gordon wasn't here perhaps he had returned to his usual haunts, so with his heart in his mouth he crossed Stricklandgate, and moved closer to his destiny.

*

Gordon's destiny was set in stone, and it seemed there was no way out of it as the guards kept close station on the way to the stoneyard. The Ruskins led the way, happy to be putting the rebellious toad to the sword at last. They crossed Stramongate towards the river. Gordon saw the sheet lightning flicker inside the clouds, and heard the rumble of

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thunder. He hoped Billy was under cover. Thinking of Billy saddened him, but spurred him on as well.

His mind was in turmoil, remembering the horrific picture of gargoyles attacking the worshippers, then turning full-circle as he wished for a life on the ground. Erasmus must be wrong, he reasoned, because he had seen too much goodness in both Billy and the people who came out to help the old lady, to believe they could hate gargoyles so much. Yes, he had seen an ugly side as well, but even on the rooftops of Kendal there was a dark side. An eroded, twisted, dark side in the form of Roman Krol. His mind flipped one way then the other. What about family? The hidden connection that Erasmus suggested would come into focus over the years? The stone from which the magnetic pull could not be denied? Who was his family?

In that regard he was twinned even more strongly with Billy, not knowing where he came from or which of the gargoyles around him were his kin. If he truly was a chip off the old block, which block was it? And who else was carved from the same stone? Erasmus felt like a father figure to him. Perhaps he was more than that.

They reached the edge of town and the Ruskins paused, looking across the footbridge towards Goose Holme to make certain the coast was clear. This was the most dangerous part of the journey, when the gargoyles had to enter the ground-dwellers' domain briefly before reaching the stoneyard. Gordon saw the hedge surrounding the putting green and remembered his underwater adventure; how Billy had pulled him out despite panicking that his friend would drown. That was another side of the ground-dwellers that Erasmus was unaware of, the capacity for self-sacrifice in the face of danger. It was something he wasn't sure if he could do, if any gargoyle would be able to do.

The fairground stood out above the black shoulder opposite. Kendal Castle was a cloaked figure to the right, its ramparts picked out by whispers of light from the myriad

carnival bulbs. The big wheel kept on turning. Conquering his fear of heights was a milestone in his life, but unfortunately that milestone seemed to have come too late. It was the stoneyard for him, and in double-quick time. Still, he would forever be in Billy's debt.

A fizz... wwwheeee... sounded from the hilltop.

Gordon watched the rocket shoot into the air; dripping sparks before it exploded high in the night sky. Three more fizzed after it then the clouds above the ramparts were painted red and white and yellow as the display took hold. The river turned into a sea of fire as it reflected the display, and Gordon saw his chance. The guards were momentarily distracted, and the Ruskins scanned the footbridge in the glare of the fireworks. They knew that their charge could no more scale the heights than walk on the moon. Vertigo was their ally.

Debts needed repaying. While his captors looked ahead, Gordon took one step backwards then jumped to his right. He disappeared over the edge before anyone could stop him, and plummeted towards the ground.

*

Billy saw the fireworks as he shimmied across Stramongate towards the bus station. If Gordon wasn't at the library then his des-res was the next best option. Maybe he had returned home for some reason. He hoped so because Billy didn't think he could find the gargoyle if he had to search the rooftops of the market town. There were too many places to hide, and too little time to search them all.

The fireworks caught him halfway across the wire, almost casting him into the street below. The next three confirmed that the display had started, and that took his mind back to the big wheel and Gordon's showdown with his fears. Billy could at least take satisfaction from having helped conquer the gargoyle's fear of heights, but he wanted so much more.

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Needed so much more. He couldn't return to Eastview after practically scratching Mr Dowker's eyes out, and the only other person in the world he could stay with had disappeared. Gordon would have liked the idea that Billy considered him a "person", and the boy recognised the irony of that. The gargoyle who was afraid of heights being rescued by a ground-dweller, and the ground-dweller who wanted to live like a gargoyle accepting the gargoyle as a ground-dweller.

He reached the other side and carefully picked his way across the flat roof overlooking the bus station. There was only one double-decker at the stands waiting to be boarded and the queue was short. Most people coming into town tonight were at the castle watching the fireworks. Two more screamers whirred into the sky then whooped in separate directions. A crackle of giant sparklers spread across the display frame, joined by half a dozen Catherine wheels. Billy could almost hear the oohs and aahs from the crowd.

The rooftop was empty, no sign of the gargoyle who had become his friend. Billy turned towards the arched glass roof of the Westmorland Centre and wondered where he might be. During the night-games they had played, Gordon took him all over the roofscape, delighting in showing off the world he lived in, but there was one place that seemed more important than the rest. The roof where he had met Gordon's other friends, the ones he had abandoned to enjoy life on the ground. If anyone might know where he was then it would be Randolph and Tadpole.

Billy cambered over the Perspex roof. More rockets lanced skyward, reflected and distorted in the curved surface, a window to the ground-world that acted as a mirror to the roofscape, showing both worlds at once like some strange time warp. He headed towards Finkle Street and the sloped roof above New Shambles, unaware that he wasn't the only ground-dweller on the rooftops tonight.

*

The low roof broke Gordon's fall, and he was scrambling along the side of the building before the Ruskins knew what had happened. The drop was exhilarating, sparking goose pimples across the back of his neck like he'd never felt before. With the absence of fear the gloves were off, and he could enjoy the sensation of flying with the carefree abandon of a child. He couldn't wait to climb his first tree or ride his first roller coaster. This was great.

Across the awnings of Kent Street, then it was up onto the flat roof behind Kendal Sporting Goods. Cut right, and up the fire escape. He was one flight down from the rooftops now, scanning the horizon for signs of the Ruskins giving chase. The guards would be in trouble for letting him escape, but if they ended up in the stoneyard instead of him then so-be-it. They hadn't seemed worried about taking him there. Explosions dotted the night sky, licking the clouds with tongues of fire.

A lone chimneystack jutted, black and foreboding, above the flat roof. It struck a cord in the back of his mind. A dark feeling spread through his stomach, a longing that had nothing to do with finding his friend. Something was tugging at him like a nagging itch that refused to be scratched. *A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.*

Gordon didn't need to hear the thunder to know that a storm was brewing, and without thinking where he was going he climbed onto the roof and turned southwest. Another battery of skyrockets blasted into the air and for a moment he thought he saw their fire reflected in the clock-face of The Devil's Tower.

*

Cold hard eyes squinted from the shadows. The skylight reflected the fireworks as if he was watching them on TV, but it wasn't the fireworks he was looking for. The eyes scanned the rooftop for any signs of movement, then his

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partner tapped him on the shoulder and pointed towards the castle. There was no banter this time, no talk about the cast of *Shipwrecked*, tonight it was business.

The eyes followed the hand, picking out the silhouette that appeared briefly above the peaked roof half a mile away.

“Good.”

He fingered the canvas bag on his lap.

“Won’t be long.”

He glanced at the window of Neville Goldenthall Jeweller and Watchmaker, and smiled. Another rocket split the air with its crackle-bang, and he wasn’t even bothered if there was thunder beneath it or not. He *was* the storm, and he would rage across Kendal soon enough.

Chapter Ten

Gordon was out of breath by the time he crossed Kent Street, and had to sit down for a rest. He might well have conquered his fear of heights but the twenty-a-day cigarette habit was taking its toll. If he survived tonight he would definitely give them up. His initial thought, after slipping the noose, was to find Billy and at least say a proper goodbye, maybe even try and address his own fear of finding his parents. But something dark had infiltrated his defences, deflected his compass from magnetic north and steered him left, towards the Town Hall clock.

All thoughts of family, and ley lines, and chips of the old block had vanished. He was driven by something deeper, and darker, and infinitely older. A primitive instinct from the dawn of time, and the homing signal was taking him west. The cowboy in him would have liked that, if he'd thought about it at all.

The fireworks danced around the heavens behind him, sprinkling fairy dust into the eyes of the spectators, and lightening their world. Ahead of him the lightning was more dangerous, and even the crash of rockets couldn't disguise the thunder that hung on its coat tails. He cursed the cigarettes for slowing him down and climbed to his feet, thankfully free from the confines of his ground-dwellers' shoes. He climbed between the chimney pots of J.H. Grubbet Chartered Surveyors, and followed his nose.

*

Billy's nose took him to New Shambles, and if he'd reflected on it that was exactly what his life had become. A shambles. Homeless and friendless, and without any family to show him the way, he was a ship without a rudder, cast adrift on a very large ocean. He dumped the carrier bag, and sat on the roof of Galabarrow and Kirkland Confectioners feeling empty and helpless. He'd been certain Gordon would be here, or at least if he wasn't then his friends would have been able to help find him. Neither was true, and he slumped, defeated, against the smoke-stained stack.

He stared across the roofscape like a sailor looking for signs of a rescue ship, but only saw another salvo of pyrotechnics from Kendal Castle. On any other occasion the sight of those beautiful explosions would have lifted his spirits, but tonight his glass was empty. Showers of sparks lit the night sky, dripping like fire-rain behind the silhouettes of peaked roofs and chimneypots, glinting off the windows of Kendal. The skylights and roofscapes of Gordon's world.

A loose slate slid down a roof to his right, and his eyes snapped round. The sky grew dark between fireworks and there was nothing to see, then three rockets and a screamer ripped the night apart, and his ship came in. Over to the west the dark forbidding bulk of the Town Hall towered like King Kong above the rooftops. Against that everything else paled into insignificance, but somewhere between the tower and the confectioners' roof there was movement. The fireworks lit the roofscape like a flare lighting a battlefield, and there in front of him, climbing expertly across the peaked roof towards the Town Hall, was the smallest cowboy he had ever seen.

*

Gauging speed and distance “flint-eyes” knew it was time. He had been thrown by the appearance of the grotesque midget on their first attempt at Goldenthal’s, but tonight he was ready. In fact it was a requirement of his changed plan that the little monster should pay a visit again. They had waited for two hours, and their patience was finally rewarded. Number Two spotted the midget coming over the rooftops, and now they just had to wait until he was within earshot.

The brick went through the window with a crash that would have been heard all over Kendal if it wasn’t for the fireworks, but it would definitely be heard by the pointy-eared freak on the next roof. Number Two returned to the pool of blackness at the far end of the gully, and “flint-eyes” unzipped the bag. Burgling tools lay in the bottom but it was the shotgun he pulled out. Fast Eddie had sawed both barrels off before selling him the gun, and it should do the job nicely thank you.

“Flint-eyes” rested it across his lap, leaving the hammers down until later, and listened. His ears tuned out the distant noises, homing in on the area surrounding his own little rooftop world. He heard the scurrying sounds from across the peaked roof and re-affirmed his grip on the shotgun, tensing his muscles in anticipation. This was going to be almost as exciting a burgling the jeweller’s.

The sky was smothered with thick dark cloud, and forks of lightning stabbed the night air. Thunder grumbled overhead, occasionally cracking louder than his fat mother’s farts. She had left him thirty years ago and he wished her dead at least three times a week. She might well be for all he knew. Lightning flashed. A crunch of thunder. Almost simultaneous. The storm was right above them, and the storm was inside him. With two swift blasts of the shotgun he would unleash it.

A shadow appeared on the roof above him.

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Steady... Steady... he told himself. *Wait for him to come down.* His forearms tensed, the muscles twisting into knotted ropes, and his finger snaked into the trigger guard. The broken window still echoed in his ears as the figure slid down into the gully. Thunder and lightning danced together. The split-splat of rain signalled the downpour, and he drew back both hammers with a double-click. The figure turned round slowly, and a pair of snow-white eyebrows stared into the twin barrels.

*

Gordon heard the window break and stopped in mid-stride. The sound came from somewhere to his right, an unpleasant distraction from his true goal, The Devil's Tower. He didn't know why he was returning there, after so recently vowing that he would not, but sometimes the forces of nature were more powerful than even a gargoyle could deny.

The window was something else. That was none of his business, and he was about to ignore it when he saw a familiar figure crest the ridge above the jewellers. Billy. His heart soared, then was split down the middle. The ley line that controlled his destiny, the power that was drawing him to the tower, wouldn't let go, and when he tried to turn towards his friend his legs refused to obey. Destiny was calling, and that destiny lay ahead, not to his right. It lay in the stone he was carved from, and the connection that had always been there, but he was only now beginning to understand.

Erasmus was right. His father was right.

Then Billy dropped down the roof and disappeared, but before he did their eyes connected for a split second. He saw a smile begin to form on the boy's lips then he was gone. Family. Ley lines. The magnetic pull of stone to stone. *But he is family too*, Gordon told himself. *A brother who is as dear to me as my own flesh and stone.*

The Tower stood before him. Enigmatic. Waiting. His friend waited as well, living flesh and blood with a heart the size of Kendal. How could he ignore that face? That smile? He couldn't of course, and forced his legs into action. With a sure-footedness that would have surprised Randolph and Tadpole he swooped across the rooftops, more like Spiderman than John Wayne. He reached the peak overlooking the skylight just as the biggest fork of lightning he'd ever seen lit the sky. Thunder shook the tiles beneath his feet, and the first drops of rain spotted the roof.

Billy stood with his back to him in the gully below. Gordon dropped quietly behind him and was about to call his name when a sound more chilling than anything Roman Krol ever made came from the blackness. The metallic double-click of a shotgun being cocked. The voice that accompanied it was ice itself.

“Two for the price of one. Come over here. Both of you.”

*

The killing ground was set, the eternal triangle of the western showdown. Billy stood near the broken window, Gordon behind him and to his right, and in the far corner, wedged in the V between both roofs, was the shadowy figure of the man in black. It seemed appropriate that Gordon should catch up with him so close to the Dark Tower that was his destiny. The ley lines drew him here and the magnetic pull was too powerful to ignore. The Devil's Tower. The tower of the town hall clock. He had been wrong when he said there was no Keyser Soze. There was, only it wasn't the eroded figure of Roman Krol, it was the stone-cold stare of the man with the shotgun.

Thunder ripped the air above them, and rain came down in stair rods, turning the slanted roofs into rivers and filling the gully. It ran along the channel to the unsupported waterspout and shot out into the back yard. The cowboy hat

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kept the rain out of his eyes but the coat was plastered to his body. Billy's hair became a dark slicked toupee flattened to his head, the snow-white eyebrows standing out in the glare of the lightning that flashed all around them. Another crump of thunder rattled the broken skylight.

"I said come over here."

The shotgun gestured come-hither, then settled on Billy's heart. Gordon took two steps towards him but further to the right, opening the angle of the deadly ménage à trois. His pistols hung ready at his hips, but he didn't think that two quick shots of water would help today. Even the air rifle couldn't stand up against a sawn-off shotgun.

Billy stayed put, shocked at the turn of events but glad to see Gordon. Whatever was going to happen at least he wouldn't die alone. That had always been his fear, being alone, and he supposed Gordon had been right about being scared to find his parents and learn the truth. Dying alone was his greatest fear, and he only just realised it now. Those final moments should be shared with someone who cared for you, even loved you, and Gordon was the only person who fit the bill. There goes that term again, "person". He hadn't considered his friend to be a gargoyle from that first night, and he wanted to tell him that now. He hoped there was time before all this was over.

Gordon had a different perspective. Billy had dragged him out of the river and saved his life. He might have been able to breathe underwater but he certainly couldn't eat there, and without a helping hand there was no way he could have climbed back out. The debt needed repaying and now was the perfect opportunity. He would sacrifice himself rather than let the boy die tonight, and with that in mind he opened the angle even further, forcing the shotgun to choose between them. The pistols would force it to choose him.

Gordon calculated angles and distances, trying to remember if the plugs fitted to the barrels of his pistols were black or white. If they were white then the man with flint-

hard eyes would see they were only water pistols, but if they were black... Timing was important. If he drew down on this desperado while the shotgun was pointing at him it would be too quick, but if he had to swing away from Billy, then the boy would have more time. He tried to send him the message, concentrating on the broken window then the back of Billy's head.

There were no fireworks left, only thunder. Either the display had finished or it had been rained off. Now there was only the storm, the one above them, and the one holding the shotgun. Rain lashed them like living stingers and the man in black came out of the shadows, his eyes unblinking. Number Two followed, keeping to one side. He was moving towards Billy, and Gordon began to see his plan go pear-shaped. He slipped the sodden coat from his shoulders and let it drop in the stream of the gully. Flint-eyes saw him and swung the shotgun his way. Number Two was almost on Billy and the plan was going down the toilet. What had he heard once? *The best laid schemes of mice and men often go astray?* Well they'd better add, *of gargoyles and men* as well.

Billy stepped back from the approaching burglar but there was nowhere to go. The gully was narrow, only opening into a triangle where Gordon stood. Goldenthall's window stood proud of the sloping roof, and apart from the triple chimney in the angle of the V there was nowhere else to hide. The shotgun swung back to the boy and it was Gordon's last chance. Number Two reached for Billy's sleeve. The barrels wavered slightly as the man got in the way. Thunder and lightning. Very, very frightening. Bang...

Gordon darted forward drawing both pistols. The grips felt comfortable despite the rain and he yelled as he ran.

"Get your hands off him."

Number Two stopped in mid-grab. Flint-eyes swung the shotgun away from them. Then... Pear-shaped. The tangled coat, hidden beneath the running water, snagged Gordon's feet and he went down like a sack of potatoes. Or a two-ton

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stone carving. The pistols flew out of his hands and vanished in the torrent. The shotgun was levelled at him, as rough hands grabbed Billy's arm. Within seconds any thought of thwarting the bad guys and saving his friend were put firmly in their place, and they were both bundled through the window into the empty office.

*

The saw ripped through the joists in smooth strokes as Number Two leaned into his work. The floorboards were stacked neatly to one side revealing the slats and plaster of Neville Goldenthall's ceiling. They were directly over the old man's office, and the un-let premises above the shop were the perfect place to cut away to your heart's content. Flint-eyes stood near the window cutting off any chance of escape. He revelled in having an audience for his master plan.

"Great criminal minds have to be flexible. My original plan was to drop into the office after old man Goldenthall turned the alarm off in the morning. Pop him before he knew what hit him. Simple. Then clean him out and leave like regular customers."

Gordon sat dull-eyed, barely paying attention. He had failed his friend, and that was the worst sin he could imagine. Even Erasmus' charge of consorting with humans paled into insignificance. You can't choose your family, but you can pick your friends, and he supposed that made friendship an even stronger bond.

"You," the shotgun prodded in Gordon's direction. "You put paid to that. Made me jump, I can't deny it. Don't know what on earth you are, but you did the dirty on that idea." He broke off. "How we doin' over there?"

The saw stopped. "Ten minutes," Number Two said.

"Good." Back to his captive audience. "Had to rethink the whole thing. Got to be able to think on your feet in this game. Just had to wait for you to show up again, and then it was

plan B. Two nights we've sat on the blinkin roof but... Here we are. Couldn't have worked out better. If it wasn't the fireworks it's the thunder. Nobody's goin' to hear us tonight, and thanks to you we don't have to wait for the old man in the morning." A gleam flickered in his eyes and it was pure evil. "Naw. Just nip down there, clean him out, then back up the rope and away. When the coppers finally get a key-holder and realise they've been done, they'll find a bag of broken bones and a canvas bag, and think you did it," pointing at Billy, "and your mate got away with the stuff."

Gordon felt cold, looking out of the window to avoid the icy stare.

"Of course nobody's goin' to find you, you circus freak. Nobody's goin' to miss you either, once the carnival's moved on. Bingo. The perfect crime. How long now?"

"Five," Number Two said without stopping.

The saw rasped in counterpoint to the rain lashing the window. Occasional grumbles of thunder indicated that the storm was moving away, but the storm inside the room was staying put. Gordon felt as low as he had ever felt in his life. He had abandoned two friends, found another one, then let that one down like a cheap pair of braces. He should have gone to the stoneyard then none of this would have happened. Without either him or Billy turning up, the burglars would have had to find a plan C. At least that plan wouldn't have included Billy.

Something moved outside. A patch of darkness in the greater dark. Gordon felt an electric shock prickle the back of his neck because he thought he recognised that shadow. He glanced across at Billy but the boy hadn't seen it. Billy was sitting with his back to the wall looking even glummer than Gordon.

Wood creaked and the joist sagged as the saw reached the last half inch. Number Two took the weight with his free hand, and sawed like mad for the final cut. Billy looked at the crouching figure, but Gordon kept his eyes glued on the

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square of night outside. Rain lashed horizontally in the strengthening wind, but the thunder had receded to an occasional grumble down the valley. The joist came free, and strong hands pulled it up through the two-foot by four-foot hole in the floor.

“Good,” flint-eyes said. “Rope and bag, then we’re in business.”

“Right.”

The henchman tied a towrope round the length of wood then dropped the coil into the darkness. He laid the joist crossways over the narrow sides of the hole so it supported the rope, then took a nylon haversack from the canvas bag. After slipping one strap over his shoulder he sat on the edge of the hole, took hold of the rope, and lowered himself into the void. A yellow circle of light from his torch dithered below.

“Alarm’ll go off next,” flint-eyes said. “Then it’s head first for you.” He indicated a dive with one hand, keeping the shotgun levelled at a space between Billy and Gordon. “Don’t want to just break a leg do we? It’s neck or bust. Ha ha.” He laughed at his own joke. “A busted neck I mean.”

The sound of breaking glass came from the hole then all hell broke loose. The alarm blasted their eardrums and vibrated through the floor. It seemed to last forever but thirty seconds later the rope tightened as the man climbed back up, torch swishing from side to side. Flint-eyes turned to watch and...

A monstrous shadow lunged through the window, hitting the gunman square in the back. The shotgun went off, blasting another hole in the floorboards in the far corner. Plaster and splinters sprayed into the confined space.

“Uummphhh...”

The wind was knocked out of him and Number Two yelled from the hole.

“What the bejassus’ goin on?”

Another shadow leaned through the window, and Randolph shouted, "All for one and one for all."

Tadpole sat on flint-eyes and dug him one in the ribs. "So much for Keyser Soze."

Gordon felt like crying but there wasn't time. He stepped towards the hole just as Number Two reached the lip, snagged the haversack's strap, then back-heeled the joist into the open space. Without its anchor the rope fell into the hole, the henchman with it. Gordon had never heard the words the man used when he hit bottom, but thought they were rather cool.

"Billy," he called. "Out the window."

The boy was on his way already, and Gordon paused long enough to step on flint-eyes' back, squashing him to the floor.

"Guess you'll have to go to plan C now."

Then he was out of the window after Billy. Tadpole followed before the man in black could get his breath back.

"Which way?" Billy yelled through the driving rain.

Gordon only hesitated for a second then nodded southwest. Of course it had to be; his destiny lay in that direction and you can't refuse your destiny. The Devil's Tower was slick with running water and its deadly black bulk stared down at them. Tadpole held back, then Randolph nudged him forward. He might be the smart one but Gordon had always been the leader. Steely eyes stared out from beneath the cowboy hat, and to Randolph they seemed more mature than the last time he'd seen them. They glanced at the flooded gully, and Gordon felt a pang at the loss of his pistols.

"Come on," he said, and lead the way.

The killing ground was silent except for the pitter-patter of falling rain and the steady rush of running water. A few minutes later the hulking figure of flint-eyes staggered out of the window and began to follow them.

*

To the tower. In the book the man in black had fled across the desert while the gunslinger followed, but tonight the roles were reversed. The last gunfighter fled across the rooftops and the man in black trailed them. Gordon felt it in his stone, and although they were four to one against him, he knew the danger hadn't passed. The haversack he wore over his shoulder ensured that. The man had been prepared to cut off old man Goldenthall's legs, and drop Billy headfirst to his death for these rocks, and he wouldn't give up because of a bunch of kids.

Kids? He was even thinking of Randolph and Tadpole as human now, and in a way that's just what they were. Maybe not in the traditional sense but emotionally they were as human as Billy or anyone else who lived on the ground. Just a different physical make-up that was all. He forged ahead, not bothering to keep to the gully they had hidden in last time, but clambering over the rooftops onward and upward. They climbed and climbed until they reached the foot of the edifice, then Gordon looked back across the roofscape.

Wet slates glistened in the moonlight as the clouds swept south, taking the storm with it. The natural storm anyway, because the storm that had threatened to kill his friend was still here. The man in black. His silhouette stood out briefly on a peaked roof twenty yards back, then slid into the dip between buildings.

Gordon was puffing and wheezing by the time they reached the first level, and waved for Randolph to take the lead. Billy followed, then Tadpole dragged his over-stuffed butt onto the ledge. Gordon took several deep breaths then climbed up himself. They were one level down from the slatted vents to the bell-tower, and had to pause while Randolph found the proper handholds in the ornate carvings. He climbed with precision, pointing out the route to Billy. Tadpole next, who belied his weight by sailing up like a

ballerina. Gordon vowed to give up the cigarettes after tonight, and was about to follow Tadpole when he froze. Somewhere above them a presence even darker than the man who chased them oozed out of the stone.

Roman Krol. Gordon felt the slanted yellow eyes watching him, and almost turned back. The plan that had formed during their race across the rooftops seemed foolish and dangerous. It was doomed to failure because how could you judge the reaction of a monster like Roman Krol? The man he knew about, but the twisted and eroded gargoyle he only sensed. What if Erasmus had been wrong?

Water ran like a river along the angles of the clock tower, gargling over the edge from a dozen unsupported spouts. That should have set warning bells ringing but he was deafened by the burglar alarm that had dented his eardrums. They still hummed with a high-pitched whistling that lowered his defences. Tadpole reached down, but Gordon ignored him.

“What’s the matter?”

The prickling sensation ran down his spine, joined by a certainty that it would all end here on this very ledge. It would be better if his friends were out of harm’s way.

“Keep going. I’ll be right up.”

Tadpole didn’t seem convinced but withdrew his hand anyway. Randolph and Billy rounded the corner, clinging to the carvings of heavenly angels, and didn’t notice the cord-like muscles intertwined among them. The head didn’t move. Eyes unblinking. Tadpole looked at their retreating backs then turned to Gordon.

“Go,” Gordon said.

There was something he hadn’t told them. Something that came to him as they clambered over the gables and winzes. As a dyed-in-the-wool western fanatic it was something he should have known but had forgotten in his haste to escape. Never leave a wounded man with a weapon. How many times had he seen John Wayne or Gary Cooper kick the dead

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man's pistol away after the showdown? What had he been thinking of? One barrel had gone off, splintering wood and plaster, but the other was still loaded.

A quick glance up at the slatted vents of the bell-tower was all he needed. His friends had rounded the corner, lost from view. But there was something up there watching him, the unblinking eyes of a mad and twisted lump of stone that had once been the proudest gargoyle in Kendal. Half the face was gone and one arm eroded down to nothing. Gordon hoped he hadn't become a complete monster.

He was looking up when he heard the click of the second hammer behind him. Water streamed in his eyes, and for a moment he couldn't turn, just standing there like the waterspout he was. Gargoyle, from the French *garguille* meaning throat. That's where gargle came from, and he felt like gypping every time Erasmus told him. Tonight he wished he'd remained as still as this all the time, like a gargoyle should. Not the cigarette-smoking rebel he had become, risking the lives of his friends for a smell of adventure. Erasmus was right, he deserved to be sent to the stoneyard for breaching the code. His place was up here on the rooftops not on the ground.

He turned slowly. The roofscape swivelled on its axis as his eyes followed the horizon until they came to rest at the far end of the ledge. The tall dark figure stood at parade rest, cradling the shotgun in one arm. It pointed towards Gordon's feet but he could see the knots of muscle in the forearms waiting to swing it up and fire. Without his pistols he couldn't even feign a draw to distract him. All that was left was the bedraggled cowboy hat... and a haversack full of diamonds.

The bag slipped off his shoulder and he held it out over the sloping roof. The Devil's Tower bulked skyward on the fringe of another world, an ordinary world of gabled roofs and skylights. It shot up like a cliff face from the gentle slopes of the foothills. Below was a drop that would break

Gordon, but it would definitely spill the jewels across Lowther Street on his way down. He let the bag drop then snagged it back. The shotgun jerked, pointing squarely at his chest. This should be where flint-eyes made a deal with him, split the haul between the two of them if he handed them over. Gordon was wrong.

“Drop them and I’ll hunt the boy down. I’ll make it my mission in life.”

Gordon kept the bag over the edge.

“You’re goin’ anyway. Cos I don’t like you. You want to save your friend, toss me the bag.”

The moon glinted in his eyes, and they truly were as hard as flint. As evil as anything Gordon had ever seen. Even Roman Krol. The gun moved closer, flint-eyes sidling along the ledge so he wouldn’t fall off. Gordon found himself wondering which barrel was loaded, the left or the right? Did it matter? Not really, whichever went off it would be curtains for him. He might be made of stone but this wasn’t a game of “scissors-cut-paper-and-paper-wraps-stone.” From this range the spread of shot would chisel him to pieces.

“The bag.”

The barrels jabbed at him, close enough to smell the cordite.

Gordon saw movement from the corner of his eye. Massive movement. The sense of it was dark and dangerous, and he realised he was between a rock and a hard place. Caught in the crossfire between a madman with a gun and a mad gargoyle with razor-teeth. He tried not to look up, the rain making it difficult to see. The clock was ticking, and the big hand moving closer to high noon. Showdown. Forget about Spiderman, this was the Gunfight at the OK Corral.

Water. Moonlight. Distant thunder. Gordon saw his world flash before him, and realised just how much he loved the roofscape of Kendal. Water sparkled off the rooftops as the moon escaped the last vestiges of the storm. A thousand windows reflected the silver disc back at him. The man in

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black stepped forward, murderous intent written all over his face.

“Gordon, what are you doing?”

Billy came round the corner followed by Randolph and Tadpole. All three were dwarfed by the massive figure that untangled itself from the cherubs. Flint-eyes looked up, first smiling at the sight of the boy, then grimacing when he saw the terrible shape of Roman Krol. Water dripped from a twisted jaw full of teeth, and the eyes were madness itself.

Gordon swung the heavy bag at the shotgun but he was too late. The gun went off and pain flared like he'd never felt before. Billy screamed and dived from the upper ledge, knocking flint-eyes sideways. Gordon's arm disintegrated below the elbow and the bag flew into the night. The world slowed down, and he saw everything as if he was an outsider looking in.

Billy slammed into the angle of the ledge and the clock tower.

Flint-eyes struggled to his knees.

The bag spiralled upwards and outwards, its straps hanging free.

And Gordon was falling, his one good arm flailing for balance.

Then it all came together in a flash. Billy kicked the man in black, taking his legs from under him. He tumbled over the edge, coattails flapping, and slid down the gabled roof to the gutter. The reason the waterspouts weren't supported suddenly became clear as a dozen gargoyles grabbed his legs before he dropped off the roof. They hooked his coat over the largest spout, hanging him like a puppet with its strings cut.

Tadpole lunged over the precipice and reached for Gordon's arm, grabbing it just in time, but the weight was too much for him. He overbalanced and went over the edge. And above all the mayhem there was the swooping shadow of the beast, all flashing teeth and rotting breath. Roman Krol

surged over the cliff, and Gordon felt shock crawl up his body.

The half-eaten face of the demon came into the light and he saw for the first time what Erasmus had been talking about. The stone was grey and mottled but halfway down its weathered face was a marble streak as clear as day. The magnetic pull of the ley lines tugged at Gordon's stomach. The undisputed tie of family.

A huge claw sliced the air faster than any gunslinger's draw. More accurate than Spiderman on his best day. It gripped Tadpole's leg as it disappeared over the ledge and halted their fall. They looked like a bad game of pick-up-monkeys. The eyes blinked and Gordon thought there was recognition behind those nasty yellow slits. Before he could examine them closer the muscular arm hurled them through the air, slapping them down on the only flat roof within reach. The skylight of Tan-Fast-ic, minus Gwen or whatever her name was.

As quickly as he had struck, Roman Krol shot up the tower, pausing briefly to throw a parting glance at Gordon. Billy climbed across to join them, not sure whether to laugh or cry. Tadpole did both at the same time. Gordon just stared at the clock tower that was his own personal Dark Tower and felt numb. Flint-eyes cursed and kicked, but not too hard. He was three floors up, and it was a long way down.

"Randolph?" Gordon finally came out of his daze, and all three realised they had forgotten the Fourth Musketeer. "Oh no."

Three pairs of eyes swung towards the ledge, expecting the worst. The bespectacled gargoyle was nowhere to be seen. The rain had stopped, and even the constant running water slowed to a trickle, but there was no sign of their friend. The gargoyles who had hung flint-eyes out to dry danced a jig around the base of the tower.

Then a silhouette they all recognised clambered onto the ledge and waved.

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“All for one and one for all.”

Randolph dropped onto the roof, and tightroped across to the group. Dangling from one hand was a nylon haversack, and when he flicked it open a million sparkling eyes smiled at them. Tadpole ignored them, chomping on the squashed bag of Kendal Mint Cake that Gordon rescued from his coat pocket.

Chapter Eleven

This time Gordon was not alone when he was called in front of the town elders. The council chamber was hot and stuffy, and filled to the rafters. Every possible vantage point was taken, and the one-armed gargoyle stood before his accuser along with his cohorts, Randolph and Tadpole. Billy Rinkfield made up an unusual fourth; the first ground-dweller to be allowed into the sacred chamber.

It was the following night, and so much had happened after the bungled jewellery heist that it was difficult for Billy to get his head around it all. When the police arrived at Goldenthal's Jewellers and Watchmaker they had found a rather dim-witted man with two broken legs screaming for his solicitor and pleading the fifth amendment – something he'd picked up from watching too many American cop shows, and completely redundant in Kendal.

After a hasty consultation with his friends, Billy had returned to the office above the shop and shouted down to the officers examining the scene. He dropped the haversack through the hole and told them where the second man was. The fire brigade unhooked him from the waterspout, and despite blabbering on about gargoyles and monsters he was arrested for aggravated burglary and unlawful discharge of a firearm. He glared at Billy as he was handcuffed and bundled into the police van.

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That was when things really took a turn for the better, because without the inclusion of the gargoyles there was only one person who could be credited for saving the day. Billy Rinkfield; a blond-haired kid with snow-white eyebrows from Eastview Children's Home.

Following his struggles on the rooftops of Kendal the police had insisted on having the Force Surgeon examine Billy for injuries. He was reluctant to talk about the welts across his back, but they finally got it out of him. Mr Dowker was suspended, and Billy relocated to a much nicer home near Kendal Green Hospital where the view from his window was of the Parish Church of St Thomas. It seemed appropriate that he should be standing in the steamy roofspace of the church now, about to defend his friend, Gordon the Gargoyle, and the other Musketeers, Randolph and Tadpole.

The candles flickered as the window was closed, and Erasmus called proceedings to order with a bang of the staff. The room grew silent but there was an air of expectation about the place. Excitement bubbled beneath the surface, only this time it wasn't negative energy. Some were even smiling. Gordon waited for sentence to be passed again.

"We have returned tonight to pass judgement on three of our own."

Erasmus' voice boomed in the high-beamed chamber, and for the first time Gordon noticed a flash of marbling beneath the town elder's right arm. Goosebumps rippled his neck and the magnetic pull he had felt yesterday tugged again. A chip off the old block? But which block? And how many taken from it?

"It was with great sadness that I pronounced Gordon guilty of consorting with ground-dwellers. He is now joined by two others whom I would never have expected to see here."

A mutter ran around the crowded chamber. Billy shuffled from one foot to the other. Gordon looked at his feet, unable to meet his friend's eyes.

"However, events have overtaken my deliberations, and thanks to the testimony of a ground-dweller of unknown origin – Billy Rinkfield – the outcome has been altered."

Gordon looked up. Randolph and Tadpole grinned. They'd known this was going to happen, the sneaky rascals.

"You will indeed be sent to the stoneyard..."

A gasp from the crowd. Gordon's heart sank.

"...but by arrangement with the Cumbria Police, and at the direction of Billy Rinkfield, the stonemason will fashion a replacement arm, and alter the shape of your toes to fit ground-dwellers' footwear whenever you visit their world."

Randolph patted Gordon on the back, and Tadpole squashed him in a bear hug. Applause filled the room. Erasmus pulled a large brass key the size of a tennis racket out of his robes.

"In recognition of the courage shown by all three of you it gives me great pleasure to bestow on you all the key to the Kingdom of the Ground-Dwellers. Providing you exercise caution you may consort with Billy and his kind without censure."

This time the applause were deafening and even the Ruskins joined in, albeit reluctantly. The guards on either side of them withdrew, and the council members surged forward to shake Gordon's hand. He was engulfed in a crowd of well-wishers, but Gordon wanted only Billy. He searched the crowd, but the boy was nowhere to be seen. Billy had gone.

*

Gordon found him an hour later on the library roof. The moon was out, painting the roofscape of Kendal with a silver brush, glinting off the skylights and windows of a hundred

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buildings. The boy sat crouched above the fire escape where they had first met, and looked up when his friend joined him. The brother he never had. He smiled at the one-armed gargoyle.

“Good job it wasn’t your leg.”

“Yeh. I could get used to this. Maybe get an eye patch as well.”

They fell into an uneasy silence. There was much to say but neither could say it. In the short time they had known each other both their worlds had changed beyond all recognition. They sat side-by-side staring out across the skylights and roofscapes, and considered the future. Billy reached into his coat and pulled a package out. It was gift wrapped, and fastened with a silver bow. He handed it over without speaking. Their eyes met, and Gordon knew what it was.

“All of them?”

“*The Dark Tower* box set by Stephen King. Books one to four.”

Gordon simply nodded, then put an arm around Billy’s shoulder.

“You know, if it wasn’t for you I’d still be scared of heights. My fear. I promise to help you overcome yours. Find your family. Soon.”

“You are my family.”

The gargoyle and the boy sat together in the moonlight, and didn’t speak again. They were chips off the old block, and what more could you ask for?

Coming Soon...

Gargoyles - Stoneheart and bloodline

