

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

RUSKIN sat on the kerb outside his house and buried his face in his hands. He could hear the drain go Ka-clunk! and the pub sign go Eeeek!

So now I've got no friends left at all, he thought. Once I had Sparkey and now Sparkey is gone. Once I had Corky and now Corky is gone. Perhaps that's the way it will always be. Perhaps we're not meant to have friends forever, just for little while.

But what will I do without Corky? Ruskin continued thinking. No more talking to him about all the plays I've read. No more listening to his stories and watching him lick the chocolate from biscuits. No more helping him sweep the

school playground and going to the cinema to see
black-and-white films.

Ruskin was in the midst of his thoughts when
he heard something right in front of him.

DA-BOINGGG!

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ELVIS stood there, bouncing his ball. Behind Elvis was Sparkey Walnut. 'Not avoiding me, are you?' asked Elvis. 'No,' Ruskin said.

'What?' said Elvis. 'I can't hear you. Your voice is such a squeaky whisper the breeze just blows it away.'

'I'm not avoiding you,' Ruskin said, a little louder.

'You called me a bad actor,' Elvis said. 'And that annoyed me. Didn't it, Sparkey?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'It's about time you found out once and for all,' said Elvis, pointing at Ruskin with one hand and bouncing the ball with the other, 'that I can do what I like. Right, Sparkey?'

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'Yes, Sir.'

'So you're going to get a scalp-scratching,' said Elvis, grabbing Ruskin and holding him tightly. 'What a muscleless, short, thin, squeaky-voiced splinter you are.'

And, with that, Elvis started to scratch Ruskin's scalp, scratching him so hard and so fast that Ruskin felt as if his hair was being pulled out by its roots.

'Stop scratching me!' cried Ruskin.

'Can't hear you,' said Elvis, scratching him even harder.

'You're scalping me!' cried Ruskin, struggling to get free.

'This should be a school game on sports day,' Elvis said to Sparkey. 'Scalp-scratching is such fun.'

'Yes, Sir,' said Sparkey.

Suddenly something fell from Ruskin's pocket and rolled into the gutter.

Elvis stopped scratching Ruskin and let him go.

'What was that?' asked Elvis. 'It looked like gold.'

Ruskin held his sore head. He wobbled from side to side. And, although his head hurt so much he could barely think, he knew what had fallen

from his pocket and what Elvis was about to pick up.

It was Corky's medal!

'It's mine,' Ruskin said faintly.

'Correction,' said Elvis, clutching the medal in his fist. 'It's *mine*. Right, Sparkey?'

'Yes, Sir,' said Sparkey.

Golden light reflected in Elvis's face as he stared at the medal. It glinted in his eyes and made him look quite mad.

'A medal,' Elvis said. 'I should have a medal. After all, I am a hero. Right, Sparkey?'

'Yes, Sir,' said Sparkey.

Ruskin made a grab for the medal. But all he managed to catch hold of was the pin.

'Go away!' said Elvis, pushing him.

The pin came away in Ruskin's hand.

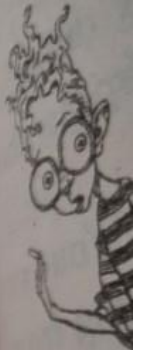
'Come on, Sparkey,' Elvis said. 'Let's go and break some more windows.'

And they walked away down Lizard Street.

Ruskin stared at the pin in his hands.

That's all he had left of Corky's gift.

He put the pin in his pocket and went indoors.





CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

HIS MUM and dad were peering through a hole in one of the sheets of newspaper that replaced their window.

'You saw that!' Ruskin said angrily. 'You saw Elvis scratch my scalp and steal something from me and you didn't do anything to help. You just watched.'

'Best not to interfere,' Winston said.

'Polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day,' Wendy said. Then added, 'Kiss.'

Ruskin sighed and sat down without kissing her.

'Tea?' she asked.

No answer.

'Scrambled egg on toast?'

Still no answer.

Wendy looked at Ruskin and asked, 'What's wrong with you?'

'I just don't want to kiss you and I'm not hungry,' he replied. 'That's all.'

'You're still upset about not getting that part you wanted in the school play,' Winston said. 'And, as I've said before, that's not my fault.'

'It's not that,' Ruskin said.

'Then what is it?' asked Wendy.

'I don't want to talk about it,' Ruskin said. And he rushed up to his room.

He lay on his bed, stared at the ceiling and thought about the first time he had spoken to Corky.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

RUSKIN had walked into the playground with his two best friends, Elvis and Sparkey. Corky – the new caretaker – was sweeping the playground.

The three boys rushed up to Corky.

‘You live on my street,’ said Ruskin. ‘Your name’s Corky Pigeon.’

‘That’s right,’ replied Corky.

‘Are you a teacher?’ asked Elvis.

‘No,’ said Corky. ‘I’m the new caretaker.’

‘What does a caretaker do exactly?’ asked Sparkey.

‘I look after the school,’ Corky said. ‘I sweep the playground and mend the broken light bulbs and clean all the windows.’

Elvis looked up at the school.
'There are a lot of windows,' Elvis said. 'It must take you ages to clean them.'

'Oh yes,' Corky said. 'It takes me ages, my dear boy. Sometimes I wish I never had to clean another window ever again.'

And, from that day, Ruskin and Corky became good friends. They talked about plays and books and the dramas of Shakespeare.

Elvis asked Ruskin, 'Why does Corky like you so much?'

'I don't know,' Ruskin answered. 'He just does.'

'He doesn't like me,' Elvis said. 'But I don't care. I think he's a silly, white-haired old man.'

Soon after that Corky gave Ruskin a football as a present, and Elvis stole the ball and started to grow, and everything changed.

Ruskin's thoughts of the past were interrupted by someone knocking at the street door. He heard his mum answer it, then call up the stairs, 'Ruskin! it's for you!'

No one ever called for Ruskin. At least, not since he had stopped being friends with Elvis and Sparkey.

Ruskin went to the top of the stairs and looked over the landing.

Corky was standing at the front door.

'Hello, my dear boy,' he said.

'Hello,' Ruskin said softly.

'Can I talk to you?' asked Corky.

A pause.

'Please,' Corky said.

Ruskin went downstairs.

The two of them sat on the kerb outside.

Ka-clunk! went the drain in front of them.

For a while they sat in silence.

Then Ruskin noticed that Corky was holding something. He looked closer and saw it was the metal helmet with the torch on it.

'What are you doing with that?' asked Ruskin.
'Are you going into the darkness again?'

'No,' replied Corky. 'This helmet's for you.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BUT . . . BUT I don't deserve it,' Ruskin said. 'I ran away from you in the school playground and . . . Elvis has stolen the medal you gave me! All I've got left is a pin!'

Corky smiled and shook his head.

'That doesn't matter, my dear boy,' he said. 'A pin is a useful thing to have.'

'But . . . but there are other . . . things as . . . well . . .' stammered Ruskin.

'Listen,' Corky said, 'nothing matters, only that we remain friends. You understand me? That's the only important thing.'

'So . . . you still want me for a friend?' Ruskin asked.

'I'll always want you for a friend,' Corky said.

They hugged each other.

'Corky,' said Ruskin, 'I'm still curious about what you did to get the medal. Will you tell me the story?'

'Oh, I'm so tired,' Corky said. 'Can't it wait a while, my dear boy?'

'Please,' pleaded Ruskin.

Corky sighed and said, 'Well, I'll tell you as much as I can before tiredness overtakes me.' Corky took a deep breath. 'When I was a child - about your age - I had no friends. Don't ask me why. It's just the way it was. I think other children thought me strange because all I wanted to talk about was the theatre and actors and actresses. So I played alone for most of the time. And my favourite place to play was ... the dump.'

'What's the dump?' asked Ruskin.

'Well, it's not there any more,' said Corky. 'But it used to be an area of waste ground. I used to play there every day. It was great fun. And then ... and then ... one day I found something ...' Corky yawned.

'What was it?' asked Ruskin, eyes wide.

'At first, I couldn't make it out,' said Corky. 'It was sticking out of the ground. It was pointed and shining like the head of a gigantic silver fish . . .'

Corky yawned again.

'Come on!' urged Ruskin.

'No, my dear boy,' Corky said, rubbing his eyes. 'Please forgive me, but I'm far too tired. I'll finish the story tomorrow.'

'But . . .'

began Ruskin.

'Tomorrow,' said Corky.

Ruskin smiled and nodded.

'Now,' said Corky. 'Time for bed.'

Corky stood up and walked down Lizard Street. His walking stick made harsh tap-tapping sounds on the cracked pavement.

When he got to his front door, Corky turned and waved to Ruskin.

Ka-clunk! went the drain.

Ruskin waved back.

Eeeek! went the pub sign.

Corky went into his house.

Corky closed the door . . .

Ruskin put the tin helmet on and switched on the torch. The beam of light shone all the way down Lizard Street.

Philip Ridley

Ruskin walked up to The Dragon and the Golden Penny. He shone the beam of light at the sign with the tiny green crocodile on it.

There it is, thought Ruskin. The baby that became Krindlekrax.

He stood at the sign for a long time, listening to it go Eeeek! in the night-time breeze.

On his way home, he suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to knock on Corky's door, wake him up and tell him he loved him. But he resisted. After all, it would be unfair to disturb Corky's dreams to tell him something he could be told in the morning. It could wait until tomorrow. Just like Corky finishing his story.

Both things could wait.

Until tomorrow.

Ruskin walked home.

The noises of Lizard Street echoed around him.

Ka-clunk!

Eeeek!

Da-boinggg!

'TISHOO!'