

Cymbelina
and
The Cat With No Name

a children's novel by
Richard Spanswick

A Blank Slate Book

You may contact Richard Spanswick at: blankslatebooks@q.com

CHAPTER 1

Major Barker's dog, Sapper, was a problem. He was a problem at five o'clock in the morning when old Jed Cowper delivered the milk – yap, yap, yap. He was a problem at seven o'clock when poor Mrs Lickspittle tried to deliver the post – yap, yap, snap – 'Ouch!' He was a problem at eight when Crystal and Christopher Christmas, the twins from next door, left for school – yap, yap, yappety-yap.

'Oh shut-up, Sapper!' snapped Crystal as Sapper yapped and yapped and tried to leap over the garden gate.

'You've been at it all night!' complained Christopher.

'They'll come and take you away and lock you up,' threatened Crystal.

'And throw away the key,' added Christopher for good measure.

But it made no difference. 'Yap, yap, yap,' retorted Sapper, and he went on yapping and snapping all day long.

Of course, it didn't help that Major Barker was stone deaf, the result of standing next to a big gun and shouting, 'Fire!' The bangs had shaken him up so much that, not only could he no longer hear his dog barking, he thought Sapper was one of his soldiers.

'Atten...shun!' shouted Major Barker. 'Present arms!' (This tended to confuse Sapper who, being a Jack Russell, only had legs.)

All the neighbours complained. Mind you, because they were British, they only ever grumbled amongst themselves and never actually said anything to Major Barker. Not that it would have made any difference, since the silver-haired Major was, as we have already said, quite deaf.

Mr and Mrs Christmas did once draw up a petition and went around the neighbourhood asking everyone to sign. Written on the petition in big black letters was: 'WE DEMAND THAT MAJOR BARKER'S DOG IS TAKEN TO THE VET TO BE DEBARKED'. All the neighbours who had signed the petition drew straws to see who would have to present it to Major Barker. Because he didn't have any real straws, Mr Christmas held sixteen cocktail sticks in his fist (you know, the ones people use to eat little sausages and bits of cheese at parties) plus one that he had broken to make it shorter. When nobody was looking, he arranged the sticks so that they all poked out of his hand the same amount, and then asked each of his neighbours to choose a stick. Slim Littleluck from number 34 drew the short straw.

Slim stood trembling outside Major Barker's gate for an hour as Sapper growled and yapped and barked and snapped. Eventually, he folded the petition into a paper dart and threw it towards Major Barker's front door. It flew beautifully through the air and made a graceful landing on the front step. It had quite an effect on Sapper. He stopped yapping, ran after the dart, picked it up in his mouth and took it round to the back garden where Major Barker was watering his geraniums.

For a moment everything was quiet and still. Then, Slim heard a rumbling sound. It was coming from behind the Major's house. It was a rumbling that grew louder and louder until it turned into a mighty roar as a purple-faced Major Barker stormed down his side passage, waving the petition in the air, and shouting, 'MUTINY!' at the top of his voice. Slim, not being a particularly brave person, turned on his heels and ran. And for two days and nights the neighbours had to listen to the combined effect of the Major and Sapper barking together in close harmony. And so it was left to the cats to sort out the problem.

CHAPTER 2

The Christmas's cat was fed up. He was fed up having to put his paws over his ears every time he wanted a little nap in front of the fire, or on the windowsill, or sprawled over the bonnet of the family car. He was also extremely fed up with another part of his life. For some reason best known to themselves, the Christmases had chosen to name him...wait for it...Mouse! Now a cat has dignity and not a little pride. So, to have to answer every day to that pathetic squeak of a name was really too much for him to bear. He had taken to going for long walks by himself and refusing, point blank, to respond when anyone called his name. All they would see was his blue-grey back and a silvery tail sticking up proudly in the air.

'Mouse! Here Mousey! Come on – foodies, there's a good Mouse,' Crystal would shout out of the back door at suppertime. Hiding in the long undergrowth at the end of the garden, Mouse would pretend not to hear, and would carry on washing his face or patting at passing butterflies. The other neighbourhood cats would snigger and call out to him, 'Hey Mousey, it's cheese time – go nibble!' or, 'Mice day today, isn't it?' or, 'Frightened any old ladies, recently?' But after the petition was presented to Major Barker and the two days of incessant yapping and shouting that followed, everyone was too miserable, tired, and grumpy to bother teasing Mouse. It was then that the meeting was called.

The evening was crisp and clear. A nearly full moon cast enough light over the park to give all the cats a clear view of the speakers. Four bouncers stood at the front of the crowd, ready to deal with any troublemakers. Old Barnet, a tomcat who lived across the street from the Christmases, began the proceedings. After climbing unsteadily onto a picnic table near the pond, he turned and glared sternly at his audience.

'Ah-hem, hrmph!' Barnet cleared his throat. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for coming and...'

'Get on with it!' shouted a voice from the back of the crowd – probably one of the young tomcats (who tend to be a little cheeky at times).

'Yes, well, as I was saying,' continued the elderly cat. 'I'd like to thank you all for coming to discuss what is, I think you'll agree, a very serious – I said a very serious matter. What is to be done about Sapper? Will you please keep quiet back there!'

Barnet was having a problem holding his audience's attention owing to a small disturbance in the centre of the gathering.

'I really must ask you all to pay attention,' Barnet was saying.

'It's a dog!' cried someone.

'I know Sapper's a dog,' responded Barnet, irritably.

‘No, *there’s* a dog!’ came the voice again.

There was a loud splash, and all heads turned towards the duck pond in time to see a great fountain of spray shooting up from the surface as a large, ferocious-looking animal careered towards them. Immediately, there was panic. Twenty kittens tried to squeeze into the one hole beneath the oak tree at the same time, and became hopelessly stuck. And the rest of the cats shot straight up the tree trunks, sending the park squirrels into a panic. Mouse found himself perched on a branch looking down at the four burly bouncers – who were the only ones left behind – with fur bristling and preparing for a fight. Then, out from the pond trotted a very wet and confused-looking red setter. He shook himself violently, so that a cloud of tiny drops of water glistened in the moonlight, and then looked around with an expression of, ‘Well, where did everybody go?’

‘Oh no, it’s Prince,’ groaned Mouse.

‘Dumbest dog in town,’ came a voice alongside.

Mouse turned to see a large tabby cat sprawled out on the next branch.

The bouncers were giving Prince his marching orders.

‘But I wanted to come,’ Prince was saying.

‘Well, you’re not invited,’ said a bouncer.

‘No dogs – so hop it!’ said another.

Prince hung his head, put his tail between his legs and slunk away with a whimper.

By now the other cats were returning.

‘Shall we go down?’ asked Mouse.

‘Waste of time,’ said Tabby. ‘They won’t decide anything.’

So they stayed in the branches and watched as Barnet told the crowd that something had to be done about Sapper’s barking. Everyone agreed, and others stood up to say how he was keeping their kittens awake at night and giving them a headache during the day. But nobody could think of anything to do about it.

‘Know what I think?’ said the tabby cat.

‘What?’ said Mouse.

‘Should talk to my cousin, Cymbelina.’

‘Why?’ asked Mouse.

‘Cos she’d know what to do.’

‘So why don’t you?’

‘Me? No thank you, we aren’t on speaking terms. She might talk to you, though.’

Mouse thought for a moment and then said, ‘What makes you think she’d know what to do?’

‘Cos she’s kind of...special,’ said the tabby. ‘Might be able to help you, too.’

‘Me? Why do I need help?’

‘With a name like Mouse, you definitely need some help.’

The next morning, Mouse was up bright and early. He made a thorough nuisance of himself on Crystal’s bed, deliberately walking backwards and forwards across her face until she was wide awake and could stand it no longer.

‘I wish you’d go and jump all over Christopher instead of me,’ groaned Crystal, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, and wearily reaching for her dressing gown. ‘You know I hate getting up early.’

She padded downstairs and into the kitchen while Mouse ran in and out between her legs, letting her know that he expected some breakfast, and he expected it now.

Even though Sapper could be heard announcing the arrival of Mrs Lickspittle with the post, no one else in the Christmas house was stirring; they had all taken to stuffing their ears with large amounts of cotton wool. Crystal made herself a mug of tea and stared over the rim at Mouse as he wolfed down the breakfast she’d prepared for him. Then, without a backward glance, he headed for the cat flap and out into the back garden.

Overnight, the weather had changed. Today, the sky was filled with dark, heavy clouds, and Mouse knew that rain wasn’t far away. He shivered a little before setting off briskly down the path towards the gap in the hedge at the bottom of the garden. From behind him he could hear Sapper announcing the arrival of Tony Blackhead, the newspaper delivery boy. Sapper and Tony disliked each other intensely, and Sapper reserved his extra-special, loudest, longest and most annoying yapping for Tony’s morning delivery. As soon as Tony turned into the street on his bicycle, Sapper would prick up his ears and start to growl. And as each newspaper was pushed through each letterbox, Sapper would let out such a volley of barks and yelps that even old Reverend Bathchair at number 31 would say things he shouldn’t.

Squeezing through the small hole in the hedge and out onto the bank of the stream that ran behind all the houses on the Christmas’s side of the street, Mouse was startled by a loud ‘Good Morning!’ Turning quickly, he saw the tabby cat sitting by the hedge, contentedly licking his paws and washing his face.

‘You’re going to get wet,’ said the tabby.

‘Oh no, I follow the bank around the corner and there’s a pipe that goes across the stream. I won’t get wet if I cross the stream there.’

‘I meant the weather.’ The tabby cat had a faint smile on his face and looked a little like he might be gloating. ‘So, directions!’ continued Tabby.

During their conversation in the tree the previous night, Mouse had agreed to make a trip to see Tabby’s cousin, Cymbelina, and to ask her if she could help solve the problem of Sapper. This morning, Tabby had come to show Mouse the way. With his paw, Tabby quickly sketched in the sandy riverbank the route to cousin Cymbelina’s house. Her home lay on the far side of town in a district that was unfamiliar to Mouse.

‘Tell her I sent you, give her my regards, and on no account tease her about her tail...’

‘Oh, but I wouldn’t...’

‘...or you’ll most certainly regret it.’ And with that, Tabby stood up, arched his back in a stretch, and sauntered away looking pleased with himself.

Mouse watched him go, and then stood for a moment looking at the sandy map. A sudden rumble of distant thunder made him look up, and he thought he’d better be on his way. As he moved swiftly along the bank of the stream, the air was filled with another sound as Sapper began to bark at a volume far louder than should be possible for a dog of such small dimensions. Mouse knew that Crystal and Christopher had left for school. He hurried on.

In less than a minute Mouse reached the big black pipe that emerged from the bank and formed a kind of bridge across the stream. At either end, rusty iron spikes stuck up to prevent people trying to cross this way and then slipping off halfway across. For a cat it was not a problem. Mouse eased himself past the spikes at one end and then trotted carefully along the pipe. As he reached the spikes on the far side, he saw little wet splodges appear on the surface of the pipe, and felt something splash on the end of his nose. He looked up. The sky was dark grey and heavy with rain clouds. Squeezing between the second set of spikes he began to hear the raindrops plopping into the water below. Every time a drop fell, it started a little ripple in the water, which spread out further and further and made the little rain drop appear far more important than it was. Mouse wondered what happened to all those drops that fell in the water – could you ever find them again – and did the ripples that they made go on getting wider and wider forever?

Mouse knew that the centre of town lay a little way from the river. The quickest way there was through an area of wasteland that you could get to a little further along the bank. An old factory building stood on the land but it hadn’t been used for years and now lay empty, with its windows smashed and its roof full of holes. Weeds and small bushes grew in the cracks that spread out like spider’s legs across the concrete surface of the yard. Mouse ran quickly across the yard, dodging the bits of rusted metal and loose bricks that were scattered everywhere. He was soon passing the old building. A large grey rat that was out searching for breakfast looked up to see Mouse coming straight towards him. The rat squeaked with fear and

surprise, ran headlong for the building, and disappeared through a half-open door into the gloomy interior. Mouse ignored the rat; he had more important things to do. And anyway, he wasn't hungry.

As Mouse crossed the yard the sound of traffic got louder and louder. Lorries and buses, cars and motorcycles zoomed up and down the road that ran past the factory and into town. Suddenly, Mouse stopped. Coming across the yard was a bicycle. Mouse crouched down behind a clump of weeds, his sleek, blue-grey body blending into the background so that you wouldn't know he was there unless you looked very hard. As the bike came nearer Mouse saw that the rider was Tony Blackhead. What was Tony doing here? He'd obviously finished delivering his newspapers and it was nearly time for school. Shouldn't Tony be in the school playground by now? Mouse wasn't going to waste his time finding out. He waited until Tony had ridden past towards the factory, then bounded towards the fence by the old porter's lodge that stood next to the main road. The fence badly needed repairing and Mouse found a large gap. He stopped for a moment and looked out. Mouse hated having to walk along roads like this, where the vehicles looked so big and he felt so small. But it was the only way into town and it had to be done. He set off along the pavement towards the town centre.

To make matters worse, it was then that it began to rain properly. No, it didn't just rain, it poured, it bucketed, it rained cats and dogs – or, at least, it rained *on* one particular cat. Within a couple of minutes Mouse was soaked to the skin. His fur hung from him in clumps, and the water made little rivers over his back and down to his tummy, where it poured off the matted ends of his fur onto the pavement. It dripped off his nose and it got in his eyes so that he could hardly see where he was going. Great puddles began to form in the gutters, and soon the trucks and cars were shooting showers of muddy spray all over him. Mouse was miserable and wondered why on earth he had agreed to set out on this silly journey. But now it would be just as bad to go back as it would be to go forward, so he carried on. Then, through the cold, misty spray, he saw a patch of dry pavement.

Dripping and shivering, Mouse sat down in the dry spot and peered about him. He saw that he was sitting under a bus shelter. In a couple of minutes a large orange bus pulled up, drenching Mouse for the second time. He ran to the far side of the pavement, shook himself and watched as half a dozen children got off the bus, put their bags over their heads, and made their way towards the nearby school gates. Thinking that Crystal and Christopher might be along soon, and not wanting to be seen here, Mouse decided to press on with his journey. After all, he couldn't get any wetter than he was already.

Soon he was passing shop windows and dodging between people's legs. He was in the town centre. Remembering his directions, he turned right at the Market Square where the traders were struggling to set up their stalls without getting soaked. Then he turned left at the old church, which had a very strange clock that always ran backwards – and no one had bothered to fix. Now he was in a twisting, narrow street of old houses and rather dingy shops. Mouse slowed down and looked carefully at the shops. He passed Stannard's, the violin repairers and Jim Bray's Exotic Animals – Reptiles a Speciality. When he reached one that had a sign above the window with 'Gudgeon's Second-hand Furniture and Bric-a-brac' painted in faded gold lettering,

Mouse stopped. Standing up on his hind legs and resting his paws against the low, shop windowsill, he peered in. The interior was dark and dusty-looking, full of chairs, tables, piles of old crockery, ornaments, and an enormous grandfather clock. From Tabby's description, Mouse knew that this was the place where he would find Cymbelina.

CHAPTER 3

Mouse pushed hard against the front door of the old shop. It wouldn't budge. He looked up at the door handle and realised he was in luck – it was a lever. If it had been a knob it would have been too round and smooth for him to turn, but with a lever he had a chance. He squatted down, tensed his hind leg muscles and then... With a great leap, Mouse sprang upwards. As he came level with the handle he hooked his front paws over the lever. Gravity did the rest. Down came his body and down went the lever. The door only opened a couple of inches but that was enough. Picking himself up from the doorstep where he had landed, Mouse leant against the door and nosed his way in. A tinkling sound above his head made him look up. A small bell on a bendy piece of metal attached to the doorframe was jiggling about and announcing his arrival. Mouse slid under an old wooden writing desk, sat down and kept very still. He felt nervous – a bit like he was doing something wrong – and anyway, he didn't really know what to do next.

He heard someone approaching. There was a sort of shuffling sound coming from the back of the shop. From his position under the desk, Mouse could just see past all the chair legs, piles of books and stacks of old pictures to where a dark brown curtain hung across a doorway. One edge of the curtain was pulled back and someone slid forward into the shop.

'Who's there?' The voice was old and cross and belonged to a woman. Mouse could see that she wore slippers, a long black skirt and a rather threadbare cardigan the colour of dried blood. 'The price you see is the price you pay – I don't haggle and I don't give credit.'

Even though it was dark in the shop, Mouse could see that the woman's face was quite round and crinkly, rather like an apple that was well past its sell-by date. Her nose was upturned at the end, which allowed Mouse to see that she had very large nostrils; it was rather like staring into two very black caves. Her hair was grey and very straggly as if she'd just got out of bed.

The old woman peered around the shop, listened for a moment and then decided that there was no one there. She saw the front door was ajar and came forward to close it, muttering under her breath about how kids today show no respect, and if she caught them pinching things from her shop again she'd make them clean out the rats' nests in her cellar. As she approached the desk, Mouse shrank back into the shadows. The bell rang again as she pushed the door to, and then Mouse watched as the slippered feet shuffled back to the curtain and disappeared.

After a few seconds it was quiet again. Mouse waited a minute longer and then cautiously put his head out from under the desk. He looked around and sniffed the air. The shop smelled of old wood, musty books and something else – something he couldn't quite put his paws on. Quietly, he edged out into the shop, weaved in and out of table legs and then, as he came out from behind an old mirror, found himself looking straight into a pair of cold, wide and staring eyes. Mouse nearly jumped out

of his skin. The fur on his back prickled and stood straight up, and every muscle in his body tightened, ready to pounce and fight or run for his life. The staring match continued and neither Mouse nor his assailant moved. Mouse was almost hypnotised by the creature's unblinking gaze. Eventually, the spell was broken by a soft cackling coming from somewhere high up. Mouse didn't know whether he dared take his eyes off the enemy to see where this new threat was coming from.

'Don't you know it's rude to stare,' said the voice from up above.

This time Mouse risked a glance to see where the voice was coming from. All he could see was the enormous old grandfather clock towering above him. He could see the great brass pendulum hanging down behind a glass-fronted door, and above that the big round clock face. Around the top of the dial were painted stars against a night sky, and through a little window could be seen a small crescent moon. A talking grandfather clock seemed a little absurd, and Mouse wanted to keep a close watch on his wide-eyed attacker so he turned quickly back to the staring eyes. The creature hadn't moved. It didn't even seem to have looked away. There was something a little unnatural about...wait a minute! Cautiously, Mouse reached forward with a forepaw, claws at the ready – just in case. He gave the shadowy creature a little tap. It wobbled slightly but nothing else happened – it just kept on staring.

'Frightened of a stuffed owl! What are you – cat or mouse?' Once more the mocking voice rained down on him.

So that was it – a stuffed owl. Feeling very stupid, Mouse looked again. Yes, now he could see the rather moth-eaten feathers and the metal wire that attached the owl to a wooden stand. But it was the kind of mistake anyone might have made in the gloomy interior of the shop. Once more he heard the cackling from the heavens. Determined to find out who it was that was having fun at his expense he jumped up onto the nearest table and looked up towards the grandfather clock. Now he saw it. Draped over the top of the clock and almost hidden behind a wooden moulding he could just make out a silky black figure and a pair of very green eyes.

'Was the little kitty frightened of the little birdy? Aw, never mind – all better now, eh?'

The black cat watched Mouse closely with her mocking, green eyes. If she was expecting a reaction she didn't get one. Mouse, now recovered from his shock, simply held her gaze and said, 'Are you Cymbelina?'

'I might be and, there again, I might not be. What's it to you, anyway?' Mouse was quite sure now that he didn't like this female feline.

'Tabby sent me. I need to talk to you.'

As he said the name Tabby, Cymbelina jumped up and glared menacingly down at Mouse.

'What tabby?' hissed Cymbelina. 'Who sent you? Out with it!' With that, she crouched down, wiggled her body slightly and then leapt off the top of the clock, landing with a little slither on the table next to Mouse. Her eyes, which were now

only a few inches from Mouse's face, were angry and fierce. But Mouse was distracted by something else. Cymbelina's tail (which must have been a good ten centimetres longer than his own) had a knot in it. It quite definitely came out from her rump, bent right around and looped back through itself before ending in a point. And now it was quivering. Cymbelina, noticing what Mouse was looking at, had become even angrier.

'And what's wrong with it?' she spat.

'Nothing. There's not... there's nothing wrong with it,' stammered Mouse who found it difficult to take his eyes off the spectacular tail. To get his attention again, Cymbelina shifted position and put her face even closer to Mouse's.

'I want to know who sent you here. Was it that no-good, low-down, good-for-nothing cousin of mine? Well, was it?'

'Yes, I think so,' replied Mouse. 'At least, he said he was your cousin.'

'How dare he! How dare he even say my name after what he did! Well I shan't forget. Oh no!'

Mouse would have liked to ask her what Tabby had done and how her tail had become knotted, but he didn't think this was quite the right time. Instead, he said, 'I need your help, Cymbelina. We all do.'

'Oh, do you?' replied Cymbelina. 'Everyone always wants something from Cymbelina, but they never want to give anything. Well, this is a shop – if you want something, buy it, and if you don't, the door's over there.' She waved her paw in the general direction of the shop entrance and then swung around so quickly that the knot in her tail smacked Mouse hard across the face, almost knocking him off the table. Cymbelina jumped gracefully to the floor, padded across to the desk and then hopped on top of it. She sat down beside an old-fashioned cash register – the kind that had levers connected to little cards, which popped up in a window with the sale amount printed on. She licked her paw and wiped it casually across her face and then sat staring at Mouse once more.

Mouse was dumbfounded. Badgers were grumpy and foxes rude, but never before had he met anyone as bad-tempered and ill-mannered as Cymbelina.

'And do you mind not dripping all over the furniture!'

Mouse looked down at the tabletop where a damp patch had appeared underneath him. It was still raining outside and the window was streaked with little streams of water. The trip had been a complete washout in every way. It was time to go home.

He dropped down to the floor and made for the front door. Now he had to let himself out. This was a little more difficult than entering because the door opened inwards. It was likely to knock him off balance as it swung towards him. He took aim at the door handle and jumped. He caught the handle with his paws but didn't manage to put enough pressure on it to release the catch. He tried and failed again. It was embarrassing to have someone watching his clumsy attempts.

‘You give up easily, don’t you?’

‘I haven’t given up. This door handle’s sticking,’ said Mouse through gritted teeth.

‘I mean you haven’t even told me why you came,’ Cymbelina responded, as if she’d been waiting for him to tell her all along. This was exasperating. Mouse began to lose his temper.

‘Just let me out of here!’ he snapped.

‘Now then, the little kitty-witty mustn’t get annoyed,’ purred Cymbelina. Mouse stopped trying to open the door and stared at this very odd cat. One minute she was mocking him, the next she was angry and the next... Mouse didn’t have time to finish his thought. The door was opening and he was about to be knocked off his feet. He leapt out of the way just as the bell started tinkling. Someone dressed in a large raincoat and carrying an umbrella entered the shop. The sound of shuffling feet could be heard from the back of the shop. Mouse was about to slip through the newcomer’s legs and out of the door when the person turned, pushed the umbrella out of the half-open door and began to open and close it rapidly. A cloud of spray hit Mouse full in the face and there were umbrella spokes everywhere. If he carried on he would certainly lose an eye, if not two. He backed off into the room to find Cymbelina at his side.

‘Follow me,’ she said and set off towards the back of the shop. Mouse had no choice. The door was already closing and the old woman he’d seen when he first came in was coming towards him.

‘Can I help you, sir? Is there anything in particular you’re after?’ Her voice was all syrupy. ‘Dreadful weather isn’t it?’ She caught sight of Mouse. Fortunately, he saw her slippered foot coming at him before it landed. He ran after Cymbelina. The old woman was too concerned about losing a sale to bother following him. ‘How about this beautiful owl, sir? It’s in wonderful condition and I’m letting it go for only one hundred and fifty pounds. A real bargain.’

‘Actually, Madam, I’m from the gas company. We don’t seem to have received any payment from you for the past eleven months.’

‘What! You scavengers are all the same. Never want to buy anything. You just want to rob an old lady of all her life savings...’

By this time Mouse was pushing past the musty old curtain. He found himself in a dingy corridor. Ahead, he could see two little green points of light.

‘This way!’ Cymbelina’s voice floated down the corridor to him. The strange smell he’d noticed before was stronger here. He walked on and, in the dim light, saw the dark shadow of Cymbelina disappearing up a staircase.

CHAPTER 4

Mouse seemed to be climbing forever. The stairs were dark and dusty, and the dust made Mouse sneeze – or was it because he was so damp and cold? Every time he sneezed Cymbelina would say, ‘Bless you, my dear!’ and cackle to herself. The third time it happened they were on the fourth flight of stairs, which was more like a ladder and had no banister. Mouse felt another sneeze coming. He tried to hold it in but it was no good. Halfway up the flight the enormous sneeze nearly knocked him off balance. As he looked up, Cymbelina turned to him with a half-smile, and in a whispering voice said, ‘Atishoo, atishoo, we all fall down!’ For a second Mouse had the impression he *was* falling. Cymbelina’s eyes seemed to him like a pair of green spinning circles and he felt quite giddy. He grabbed hold of the stair-tread to steady himself. Cymbelina seemed not to notice and carried on up. Mouse shook his head to clear the dizziness and continued.

At last they reached the top. Here, the ceiling sloped down to form the walls and a small, round and very dirty window cast a glimmer of light across the landing. They were clearly up under the roof of the old house. Cymbelina made her way silently across the landing and leant against a small door. It creaked ajar and she disappeared inside. Mouse wasn’t quite sure whether he should wait outside or follow her in. He felt more than a little nervous. His hosts had not gone out of their way to make him feel welcome here, and now he was just about as far from the front door and the safety of the street as he could get. He stood outside the small door and kneaded the carpet nervously. Once more the green eyes appeared in the doorway.

‘I haven’t got all day!’ Cymbelina snapped. ‘Seems like we’ve got a bit of a scaredy-cat here.’ She retreated into the room. Stung by this latest insult, Mouse put aside his concerns and followed her in.

The room he entered was lit only by a small dormer window set into the roof eaves and the glow from a coal fire burning in a small grate on the end wall. An old wingback armchair stood near the fire, draped with a crimson fabric, and a pouffe covered in the same material was positioned nearby. Against the wall opposite the fire was a bookcase filled with books that looked as if they might have been there since the house was built – and that was a long time ago. A small table under the window completed the furnishings. The room seemed filled with the rather sickly aroma that Mouse had been smelling ever since he had entered the shop.

‘Welcome to my consulting chamber, please make yourself comfortable,’ Cymbelina said sweetly. Mouse was finding the constant seesawing of her moods rather tiring. The black cat took up a position on the armchair and nodded towards the pouffe. Not wishing to be rude, Mouse seated himself on the pouffe and waited. Beyond the window the grey clouds scudded across the dark sky. Inside the room the flickering of the firelight sent shadows leaping across the furniture and walls. The burning coals crackled and spat and Cymbelina curled up, resting her chin on her paws, and studied her guest. Her knotted tail flicked up and down every now and then. Mouse felt drowsy and a little mesmerised by the movement of the tail.

Cymbelina began to hum to herself. It was a good few seconds before Mouse realised she was humming the tune to ‘Three Blind Mice.’

Suddenly Cymbelina stopped humming and said, ‘So how is my pretty tabby cousin? Mmm?’

‘He seems fine,’ replied Mouse, adding because he felt he ought to, ‘but I don’t know him very well.’

‘No, I don’t suppose you know him like I do.’ She paused and then, flicking her tail more vigorously so that it made a slapping sound on the chair cushion, she went on, ‘You know he’s responsible for this.’ She held up the loop.

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Mouse. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Oh, no need to be sorry, my friend. After all, think of the benefits. It’s perfect for swatting flies and I’ll never have a problem getting the lids off jam jars again.’

‘I’d not thought of that,’ admitted Mouse.

‘So, all in all, he’s done me a favour, don’t you think?’

‘I... I suppose so,’ said Mouse cautiously.

‘Oh yes, and I’d like to do him a favour in return. It’s only fair, isn’t it?’

Mouse said ‘Yes,’ but he wasn’t sure he meant it.

‘So,’ Cymbelina continued, ‘what was it that you and my wonderful cousin wanted to talk to me about? Such a shame he couldn’t be here himself.’ She smiled innocently.

By now, Mouse wasn’t really sure he wanted to get Cymbelina’s help. Her constant mood swings left him confused and he certainly wasn’t convinced she really thought that Tabby was wonderful. But he’d come all this way to talk about Sapper, not Tabby, and it was still raining outside. He was warm and comfortable here above the shop; what harm could there be in telling her the problem?

‘Well, it’s about my next-door neighbour,’ began Mouse, and as the fire glowed and sparkled and the rain spattered against the window pane, he told Cymbelina the whole story of Sapper’s mad barking and the barking mad Major Barker.

‘So just a little noise abatement problem,’ said Cymbelina casually when he’d finished. Mouse didn’t know what ‘abatement’ meant, but he nodded in agreement. ‘Personally, I can’t see that being too difficult to resolve.’

‘So you think you can help?’ Mouse said, hopefully.

‘Without doubt,’ responded Cymbelina. ‘The real question is, can you afford me?’

Now this was an unforeseen difficulty. Mouse hadn’t considered the question of payment.

‘I’m afraid I don’t have anything to give you.’ Mouse was a little embarrassed.

‘Oh, but I’m sure you can think of something that would be of interest to us. Our little shop is full of all sorts of things that people didn’t know they had tucked away in some forgotten corner.’

Mouse thought for a minute and then sighed and shook his head, ‘No, I’m sorry, I can’t think of anything.’

‘Well, my friend, in every transaction there has to be a little give and a little take. I’m prepared to give you a quiet life. What small thing can I take in return; what little token? I really am so keen to help my new friend, Mr... what did you say your name was?’ Here, Cymbelina looked at Mouse with such intensity that he started to feel dizzy again. Those green eyes seemed to swirl and sway in front of him, and he thought he was going to fall off the pouffe.

‘I didn’t...’

‘Oh no, that’s right, you didn’t tell me.’ Cymbelina’s deep and mysterious eyes held Mouse locked in their unblinking gaze. ‘Would you like to give me your name now?’

‘My name?’ Mouse felt himself being sucked into that spinning pool of green. He was sinking, sinking... Then, suddenly, something clicked in his head. He snapped out of the daze and everything was clear – so bright and clear he was almost dazzled. He knew the answer to the problem – the problem of his own life.

‘My name!’ Mouse almost shouted the words. ‘Yes, I’ll give you my name!’

No sooner had he said it than he wished he hadn’t. The room went quiet and Mouse began to feel rather silly. He shifted uncomfortably on the pouffe. Then Cymbelina smiled quizzically and said, ‘You mean you’ll give me your name in exchange for my stopping Sapper barking? That’s the deal?’

‘Yes,’ said Mouse, sheepishly.

‘And what will you do without a name?’

‘I don’t know – get another, I suppose.’

‘Well, well, well, what an unusual offer! I’ll have to think about that.’ She looked into the glowing coals and thought. A shower of sparks rose and settled like fireflies on the bricks at the back of the fireplace before dying out. ‘Mmm, what can I do with a name?’ Cymbelina turned back to Mouse with an amused expression and continued, ‘Can I put it in the shop window with a sign saying “One Slightly Used Name. A Bargain at £200”? Or maybe I could sell it with the grandfather clock: “Special Offer, Buy this Antique Clock (needs slight adjustment) and Get this Antique Name Free!” After all, your name is an antique isn’t it? Passed down from your father and your grandfather and your great-grandfather? Oh, but forgive me, I don’t know your name, do I? How can I tell what it’s worth?’ Cymbelina paused and looked expectantly at Mouse.

‘It’s Mouse,’ said Mouse very quietly.

For a moment the silence was deafening. And then Cymbelina almost exploded with delight.

‘Oh, wonderful, wonderful! A cat called Mouse! And you don’t want to keep such an original name? Shame on you – it’s so much funnier... I mean more interesting than Blackie or Felix.’ Cymbelina tried (but not very hard) to keep a straight face.

‘It’s not interesting, it’s awful,’ said Mouse. ‘Everybody laughs at me or makes the same stupid jokes that I’ve heard a thousand times before. I don’t want to be called Mouse anymore. I’m a cat and I deserve to be treated like one.’

‘Yes, of course you do. And as a cat myself, I feel it’s my duty to help another cat in distress. And you are distressed, aren’t you, my poor, poor Mouse.’ Cymbelina smiled sympathetically and dabbed a paw to her eye as if there was a tear that needed to be wiped away. ‘Yes, whatever the cost to myself, I must help,’ she continued. ‘And as for this dreadful barking dog...yes, it is most certainly my duty.’ And with that, she slid off the chair and walked over to the bookcase.

Mouse watched as she selected one of the books, pulled it from the case and opened it. A small cloud of dust rose into the air as she turned the old and yellowed pages. Soon, she found what she was looking for and began reading. Every now and then she would mutter to herself, ‘So, that’s the way... ah ha... ah ha... I like it!’

After a while she slammed the book shut, making Mouse jump – he’d almost drifted off to sleep – and she turned round with a glint in her eye. ‘We’re ready!’ she exclaimed and crossed to the table under the window. From beneath the table Cymbelina began to pull out glass jars. It was so dark in the shadows under the table that Mouse had not noticed these jars, filled with liquids – ruby-red, emerald-green and cobalt-blue – and one that was so black that it looked to Mouse as if it was a window, through which you could see the night sky. When this one was brought out, Mouse was almost overcome by the smell – that same, sweet smell that had been present throughout the house.

Cymbelina poured small quantities from the red, green and blue jars into a saucer. As the liquids were mixed together, the saucer began to steam. Then, something very odd happened. The arc of a rainbow began to appear over the top of the saucer. It glowed and shimmered with all the colours from red to violet and, as it did so, there was a strange hissing sound that came and went like waves breaking over the seashore. Next, a single drop from the black jar was added to the mixture. Now, the hissing became a humming and the rainbow began to rise above the saucer, growing larger and larger until it spread across the width of the room, with one end arising from the old book and the other buried in the fire. Mouse thought it was incredibly beautiful. The humming became louder, almost like singing, and it seemed to be coming from the fireplace now – as if the dancing flames were the tongues of a choir. As Mouse watched, the rainbow began to change. The individual colours were becoming blurred, mingling together until the rainbow had become a single solid band of silver, as bright as the brightest stars. The singing was becoming a roar, like

the rushing of a waterfall. Mouse was so stunned by the beauty of what he saw and heard, he wanted it to go on forever.

But what happened next made him very, very fearful. Cymbelina began to rise from the floor. Her eyes had become huge dishes of green liquid and she floated upwards, expanding like the rainbow, until all Mouse could see were those two liquid pools threatening to drown him. Suddenly, Mouse felt something tugging deep within him, something trying to loosen itself. He fought to hang on to whatever it was that was pulling away from him. But the power was too strong. Whatever it was wrenched itself away and seemed to fall into Cymbelina's pools, for he could see two large ripples spreading outwards, getting wider and wider and fainter and fainter. Mouse felt empty. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again the singing was beginning to die away and Cymbelina was lying on the floor as if she were asleep. The rainbow had turned gold, like the setting sun, and it was starting to disappear, fading gradually from the book towards the fireplace. At last its golden glow faded to nothing, and as it died, so the fire fizzed and popped for a second and finally went out.

Mouse blinked and looked around. He noticed that it was almost dark outside. With a start, he realised that he must have been here all day. That was odd because he was sure he'd only spent an hour or two in the house. Everything that had happened now seemed like a dream to him. He thought that he'd better be getting home as he was very hungry and he knew that the Christmases would be starting to worry.

Cymbelina hadn't moved. She was curled up next to the now empty saucer, and was sound asleep. Mouse got off the pouffe and tiptoed over to the door. He pulled it open a few centimetres and slipped out onto the landing. Everything was quiet. He made his way down the four flights of stairs and back into the corridor. From the other side of the curtain that separated the corridor from the shop he could hear a slight rustling noise and a little muttering. He poked his head around the curtain and watched. The old woman was standing by the desk counting money. Mouse realised that she must have just closed the shop and was checking the day's takings. She was certainly grumbling about it, 'How do they expect me to live on this *and* pay all those blasted bills. I might as well be running a charity!'

Mouse wondered how he was going to get out. He thought about trying to imitate Cymbelina's meow – the one that all humans know says, 'Let me out, I need to go to the loo, NOW,' – and hope that the old woman would just open the door without looking; but he was not a good mimic. Should he wait and see if she had to go out for any reason and try to slip out past her? Or should he just make an awful noise and pretend that he'd been trapped all day, so that she would just try to get rid of him? The trouble was, for all he knew, she might want to have him stuffed and mounted like the unfortunate owl he'd bumped into that morning.

The decision was made for him. Just as the old woman was stuffing all the money into a pocket in her cardigan, a knock came on the door. She almost jumped out of her skin. With one hand clutching her pocket and muttering, 'Who the devil's that?' she put her face up to the door, peering out into the darkness, and then opened

the door about six or seven centimetres. That was enough for Mouse. He shot out from behind the curtain, raced towards the door and squirmed through the gap, praying that the old woman wouldn't try to shut the door while he was still 'the meat in the sandwich'. He didn't wait to see what was happening behind him. He made straight for the street and for home, with the last words from the old woman ringing in his ears: 'Do you think I'm made of it? It's me you should be collecting for – not these blasted dogs that leave their messes all over my doorstep!'

CHAPTER 5

As he trotted home Mouse thought about the day's strange events and about how he would be a very important cat now. Everyone would want to hear the story of how he had saved the neighbourhood from Sapper's barking. He would be asked to speak at public meetings, and it was quite likely that he would replace old Barnet as the cats' leader. Yes, it had been a very strange, but also a very good day. There was just one little nagging doubt in Mouse's mind: had it worked? Had Cymbelina, with her potions and her rainbow, really been able to stop Sapper barking? He hurried on, anxious to find out that he really was a hero.

When he reached the Christmas's house it was quite late and the lights were out. He stood near the fence that separated the Christmas's garden from Major Barker's and listened. Yes, it was very, very quiet. That was a good sign, but it was too soon to be certain that Cymbelina's magic had taken effect. He would have to wait 'til morning. Anyway, he was very tired now – and hungry. He padded up to the backdoor and slipped through the cat flap. The kitchen was in darkness; everyone was probably in bed. Fortunately, there was some food in a dish near the washing machine. Mouse gulped down a few mouthfuls and then curled up in his basket by the radiator.

He was just beginning to drift away into sleep when a small noise made him prick up his ears. From over near the washing machine he could hear a tiny scratching sound. Mouse stayed perfectly still and listened. There it was again. Suddenly he was fully awake with eyes wide open, trying to see movement in the darkness. Very, very quietly, Mouse uncurled himself and slid out of the basket. With shoulders hunched, one paw at a time he inched forward towards the noise. For a split second he thought he saw something – a movement by his food dish. He stopped and watched. Yes, there was something there, something small and furry and – good grief – it was eating his food! Mouse measured the distance with his eyes, tensed his muscles and leapt. He landed right on target catching the tail of the little creature under his right paw. It squeaked in alarm. But unfortunately for Mouse, as his body came down, his left paw caught the edge of the dish and it tipped up, hitting him full in the face. At the same time, the creature was thrown off the dish and its tail was yanked out from under Mouse's paw. Before Mouse had a chance to recover and see what was happening, it scurried away underneath the washing machine. He tried to get a paw in the gap beneath the machine, but it was no use, the creature was out of his reach.

Mouse was cross. He didn't like sharing his house or his dinner with other animals and he didn't like to be made a fool of. If he hadn't been so tired he would have sat next to the washing machine and waited for the intruder to show his or her face. It would have to come out sooner or later. But all he wanted now was to sleep. He would get the little creature – whatever it was – in the morning. He curled up in his basket once more. For a while he kept watch and listened out for any further movement, but all was still. He was glad the noise of the failed attack hadn't woken any of the Christmas family. It would be embarrassing if they discovered that he couldn't keep their kitchen free of vermin. And what exactly was the creature? From

the little he could see in the dark shadows of the kitchen it had looked like a mouse. But he could have sworn that it had some odd stripes on its back. Mice don't have stripes. Eventually Mouse slept, and dreamed that a thousand striped animals were coming through the kitchen to see the amazing cat that had saved the town from disaster. They all had great big green eyes that rippled like ponds.

CHAPTER 6

In the morning he woke with a start. Mr Christmas was leaning over his basket with a mug of tea in his hand and staring at him angrily. Mouse remembered the creature under the washing machine and wondered if Mr Christmas had found it.

‘What the devil!’ bellowed Mr. Christmas. ‘What do you think you’re doing in here? Get out! Go on, get out now!’ With that, he kicked the basket. Mouse was shocked. He’d never been treated like this before. The Christmases were always loving and kind towards him. Mouse jumped out of the basket and looked up at Mr Christmas. The man started to move towards him, menacingly. ‘Out!’ he shouted, ‘Get back to your own home.’ Mouse was confused. Just then, Crystal appeared in the doorway.

‘What are you shouting about, Daddy?’

‘There’s a stray cat in the kitchen. I’m trying to get it out.’

‘Where’s Mouse?’

‘I haven’t seen him. Go on, I’ve told you once, scram!’

Mouse thought, ‘Have they gone crazy? I’m here!’ He saw Christopher come up behind Crystal and rest his head on her shoulder.

‘You lot are making too much noise, and what’s that cat doing in our kitchen?’ He dug his chin into Crystal’s shoulder.

‘Ow!’ said Crystal crossly. ‘What did you do that for?’

‘You’re in the way,’ replied her brother. He pushed past his sister and called to Mouse. ‘Here kitty. Come on.’

‘At last,’ thought Mouse, ‘someone recognises me.’ He ran past Mr Christmas towards Christopher and rubbed himself against the boy’s legs. But Christopher swept him up with one hand, carried him to the door and unceremoniously pushed him through the cat flap.

‘And don’t come back!’ shouted Christopher after him.

Bewildered, Mouse sat on the doorstep in the early morning light. It wasn’t raining, but Mouse didn’t really notice. How could he have suddenly become a stranger in his own house? Before he had time to think, he heard a shriek from inside the kitchen, followed by Crystal shouting ‘Get it out, get it out!’ Mouse knew they’d found the creature. A second later a fist shot through the cat flap almost knocking Mouse off the step. The fist opened and released something small and furry, which fell straight onto the step right beside Mouse. The hand, which belonged to Mr Christmas, disappeared back through the flap. ‘That blasted stray must have brought it in – looks diseased to me,’ said Mr Christmas.

Mouse and the creature stared at each other in stunned silence – too shocked and confused to do anything else. Mouse could now see that the creature was indeed a mouse – but a mouse unlike any other that Mouse had ever seen. It quite clearly had black, brown and grey stripes – the markings of a tabby cat. Looking very frightened, the mouse began to speak in a tiny, shaky voice.

‘Truce? Will you let me squeak... I mean, speak?’

‘Go on,’ said Mouse, suspiciously.

‘You have to promise that we have a truce, first,’ said the mouse.

‘I don’t see why I should promise anything to a burglar,’ replied Mouse.

‘I know what’s happening here,’ said the mouse. ‘I’m Tabby!’

‘I can see you’re tabby and it looks very silly on a mouse,’ said Mouse.

‘No, I’m *Tabby*, Cymbelina’s cousin. I’m a *cat*, not a mouse.’

‘Pull the other one,’ scoffed Mouse. ‘It’s got bells on!’

‘Please say we have a truce,’ pleaded the tabby mouse.

Even though he thought this odd creature was completely mad and talking gibberish, Mouse was curious. ‘All right, truce then,’ said Mouse.

Just then, they heard a noise coming from the street. It was Tony Blackhead doing a wheelie on his bike and falling backwards off the saddle from the weight of newspapers in his shoulder bag. ‘Ouch!’ Tony complained loudly before picking himself up and crashing open Major Barker’s gate. The tabby mouse was about to start speaking again when Mouse put out a paw (which made the little rodent extremely nervous) and said, ‘Quiet – hush!’

They sat expectantly and listened. Tony walked up the garden path. They heard nothing except the crunch of gravel. Tony slipped the newspaper into the letterbox. The flap clattered as the newspaper fell onto the doormat. Nothing else. A gust of wind blew and the flap rattled again. No bark, no yelp, not a whimper, nothing, zero. Tony must have been surprised because it was at least twenty seconds before they heard him cross the gravel and jump the fence to deliver the Christmas’s paper. The letterbox clanged, and they waited as Tony slammed the Christmas’s front gate shut, got onto his bike and rode off. Still no Sapper, just the faintest meow, presumably from a passing cat.

Mouse turned proudly to the tabby mouse. ‘Yes!’ he exclaimed. ‘I’ve done it. I’ve cured Sapper. The whole district can rest in peace. You can be the first to shake my paw, if you like.’

‘Maybe later,’ mumbled the tabby mouse.

‘Now what were you about to say – but make it quick. I expect people will be calling soon to get my story and congratulate me.’

The tabby mouse looked up at Mouse and began, 'First of all, I know who you are – or at least I know who you *were*.'

'You're talking in riddles,' said Mouse.

'I know who you were yesterday, and today... well today...' and here the tabby mouse edged a little further away from Mouse, 'today... you're *nobody*.'

Mouse snapped, 'What are you talking about. I'm the one that...' but then he stopped. He remembered how he'd made a bargain with Cymbelina – that in return for her stopping Sapper barking he would give up his name. His name! How could he have been so stupid! His name was the one thing that he needed now. How can you be famous without a name? But what was his name? Surely you can't forget your own name. But he had. He hunted around in his head, but he couldn't remember it. He started to panic. That must have been why the Christmases hadn't recognised him. He was no longer... whatever he'd been. Now he was – a nobody.

'Who am I?' cried Mouse. 'Who am I. Tell me, please tell me!' He looked imploringly at the tabby mouse.

'I can't tell you,' said the mouse.

'What do you mean you can't tell me?' snapped Mouse. 'Tell me or I'll make mincemeat out of you!' And he moved his face alarmingly close to the tabby mouse.

The creature shrank back in fear. 'No, no, no, no! You must listen. If you do anything stupid now it'll be the end of us both.'

Slowly, Mouse drew back from the tabby mouse. He needed to know what was going on here – and he needed to find out who he was. 'Go on then,' he said. The tabby mouse took a deep breath.

'Yesterday, we met on the banks of the river and I gave you directions to my cousin Cymbelina's house.' Mouse was about to protest that this was nonsense and he wasn't going to be made fun of, but thought better of it and let the mad mouse continue. 'I thought it would be a bit of a laugh to see what she would do – especially with the problem being a dog and all that. She's always been into spells and magic, you know – comes from a long line of witches' cats... well, we both do. You see, you have to believe that I *was* Tabby. Really, I still *am* Tabby but I don't seem to be a tabby cat anymore.'

Here he paused and looked so miserable that Mouse thought he was going to cry. He gave a big sigh and continued. 'Cymbelina was always showing off and trying to prove how clever a magician she was. One day I was out with my girlfriend – she was a gorgeous Persian called Sira. We had chased a few squirrels for fun and were cuddling up together when Cymbelina walked by. I could tell she was up to no good – you can always see it in her eyes. Anyway, I ignored her and turned back to Sira. I wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, but as I tried to speak I started dribbling. Every time I opened my mouth I dribbled. I was spitting saliva all over the place – including Sira – and there was nothing I could do about it. I was so embarrassed.

Cymbelina, who'd been watching us from up a tree, just fell about laughing. Pity she didn't fall right out of that tree. Of course, I never went out with Sira again.'

'After that I was determined to get even. I had never been serious about magic but I knew a little. I thought it would be neat to give Cymbelina some pigtails. You know, plait her fur so she looked really silly. But something went wrong with the spell and I ended up making her tail into a kind of pig's tail. It curled around and made a loop and then wouldn't go back.'

Mouse looked sceptical. 'Well, if she's such a whizz with the wizardry why couldn't she undo it?'

'Because you can't work the magic on yourself,' replied the tabby mouse as if everyone knew that. 'By the way do you smell something burning?'

Mouse sniffed the air. 'Christopher's probably burnt the toast again. So why didn't *you* undo the spell?'

'I tried, but I couldn't get it right. Cymbelina went berserk and said my life wouldn't be worth living after she finished with me. I believed her. No way was I going to go anywhere near her again.'

'But she got you in the end – is that what you're trying to tell me? Yesterday you were Tabby and today you're a mouse?' Mouse thought for a moment. 'But I still don't understand what that has to do with me and my name – you know it'll come to me in a minute.' Mouse frowned in thought but nothing came.

'Well, just believe me when I tell you that it has a great deal to do with it. If I tell you your name without undoing the magic, that's the end of me!' Tabby glanced nervously at Mouse and added quickly, 'Oh, and before you get any ideas, if there's no more me and the spell is still in force, you'll forget your name forever!' Then, to ram the point home, he sniffed and said, rather self-importantly, 'And there'll be no one to help you undo the magic and find out who you are again.'

'What's to stop me getting a new name?' asked Mouse.

'Only one of the most powerful spells I've ever seen,' replied Tabby. 'You don't think cousin Cymbelina would make it that easy, do you?' Here, Tabby turned and sniffed the air again. 'There is something burning, you know, and I don't think it's toast.'

Mouse could smell it, too, and now there seemed to be smoke drifting across the garden. It was coming from the direction of Major Barker's house and it was getting thicker as they watched. Quickly, Mouse ran over to the garden shed that stood next to the Major's fence. He scrambled up onto the roof of the shed and looked across the fence. His heart leapt into his mouth. There was thick black smoke billowing out of the downstairs windows of the Major's house. Mixed in with the smoke were great tongues of orange flame that darted out of the windows and licked the walls, as if they were trying to reach the upstairs windows. There was no sign of Major Barker or Sapper.

CHAPTER 7

When Tony Blackhead had delivered Major Barker's newspaper that morning there was no sign of Sapper. It was a big disappointment! Tony had become used to Sapper's bad-tempered greeting every morning. He shoved the paper through the letterbox and listened as it plopped onto the doormat. There was no other sound. Tony wondered if Sapper was sick or if Major Barker had taken his dog for an early walk. He waited a few seconds and then jumped the fence to the Christmas's.

The paper had flopped open as it hit the mat. Some moments later a large gust of wind blew through the letterbox, caught the top sheet and whisked it up into the air. It flew straight into the Major's kitchen and landed on the gas hob where a pan of bubbling water was boiling the Major's breakfast egg. The Major had gone back upstairs to shave.

Of course, he knew nothing about the fact that his dog's bark was no longer worse than his bite. (If you remember, Major Barker was very deaf.) The poor beast's mouth would open and close but all that came out was a tiny...wait for it...all that came out was a tiny meow! This had confused Sapper so much that he'd gone round and round the house since tea-time the previous day looking under beds and in dark corners to see if he could find what he'd lost. Now he lay under the kitchen table feeling extremely sorry for himself.

The paper settled next to the saucepan. As the gas flame curled around the edges of the pan it found a corner of the paper. Within a second a hundred words were on fire, the yellow flame turning blue-green as the ink fuelled the fire. A second later, a thousand words and a photo of the President of the United States of America were burning brightly. As the flames consumed the paper, so it got lighter and began to rise, drifting across the kitchen and onto the table. Now the tablecloth was persuaded to join in and soon the whole table was alight. Smelling the smoke, Sapper looked up. Whichever direction he turned he saw flames and he was petrified. Of course he tried to bark, but it was no use – he merely sounded like a kitten asking for milk. While he sat there too frightened and confused to move, the curtains by the window next to the table caught. Sapper saw the flame shoot up the material and, instinctively, he backed away. He bumped into one of the table legs and a bottle of olive oil, which was standing on the burning tablecloth, wobbled for a moment and then fell, spilling its contents right into the flames. Now that really did put the cat amongst the pigeons or, in this case, the fuel on the fire. The kitchen became an inferno.

The Major was just finishing shaving, carefully guiding the razor around the edges of his bushy moustache, when he first smelled burning. He thought it was a little early for someone to be having a bonfire. He rinsed his face, cleaned his razor and picked up a towel to dry himself. Then he buttoned his shirt and marched out of the bathroom. His egg would be perfectly done. He always shaved in precisely the three minutes it took to boil. Humming the tune to "The Grand Old Duke of York",

Major Barker went downstairs. To his surprise, he descended straight into a war. The smoke from a hundred guns was drifting across the battlefield making it difficult to see. Flashes of flame shot up from grenades as they hit their targets. Major Barker shouted encouragement to his troops as he marched them into the battle. Then, as the thick, acrid smoke became denser and he began to cough and splutter, the Major began to realise that there were no guns and no grenades. He was at home and his house was on fire! His first thought was for Sapper. When the Major had been a soldier he'd always looked after his troops and made sure they had everything they needed. Now he was retired he looked after Sapper – and suddenly he remembered that Sapper had been in the kitchen when he put the egg on to boil.

Almost choking on the smoke, the Major groped his way towards the kitchen. But he couldn't see a thing and it was getting very hot. Now he was finding it very difficult to breathe. He called Sapper's name, but there was no response. The Major knew there was very little time before he would be overcome by the smoke. He turned around and tried to find the front door.

It was Slim Littleluck who found the Major. He was passing on his way to work and saw the smoke and flames shooting from the windows. As he ran up the garden path to see what he could do, he heard the Major calling Sapper's name. Slim picked up a rock from the garden and broke the glass in the front door, reached inside and turned the latch. As the door opened he was greeted by a blast of hot air and smoke that sent him staggering back from the house. He reached in his pocket, pulled out a handkerchief and held it over his mouth and nose. Then, on his hands and knees to keep below the thickest smoke, he crawled into the hall.

He could hear the crackling of the fire and the crashing of beams as the ceiling gave way somewhere close by. He knew he didn't have long. Shouting the Major's name, he crawled forward a few more feet. Then his hand touched something. It was a foot. Grabbing hold of it, he turned and pulled with all his strength. He managed to drag the Major to the front door and out onto the step. There, helping hands pulled them both to safety. Mr and Mrs Christmas had arrived. The poor old Major was gasping for breath and kept repeating in a hoarse whisper, 'Sapper, have you found my Sapper?' They hadn't, but they kept reassuring the Major, telling him that they were sure Sapper would be all right, even though they weren't sure at all.

The ambulance arrived about thirty seconds before the fire brigade, and whisked the Major and Slim Littleluck off to hospital. Slim had to stay overnight for checks, but he was allowed to go home the next day. The Major was kept in for a week because of all the smoke he had inhaled. All that remained of Major Barker's house was a burned-out shell. The outside walls were streaked with soot, the roof had caved in and the interior was just a mess of blackened rubble.

CHAPTER 8

Of course, the fire became headline news in the local paper, and Slim was a hero. But there were questions. How had the fire started? Why hadn't it been discovered earlier? Everyone knew that Sapper was the noisiest dog in town, why hadn't he barked and warned everyone of the danger? Nobody knew the answers, but of one thing they were certain – Sapper was dead. You'd think that people might have been glad that the noisiest dog in town was no more, but they knew how much that dog meant to Major Barker.

And when the Major came out of hospital everyone could see how sad he was. They expected the Major would have to move into an old people's home but he refused. He said he'd rather sleep in a tent in a field than go into 'one of those places'. To help him out, the owners of the land where the old factory stood allowed the Major to move into the gatehouse, and a group of neighbours got together and cleaned the old place out and found some furniture for him. When the Major moved in he put a small notice in one of the windows that overlooked the street, offering a reward of £50 for Sapper's safe return. Everyone, including the Major, knew that he would never have to pay the reward, but perhaps it made him feel better.

And what of Mouse and Tabby? Well, they became rather like outlaws. Nobody recognised them and they had no place to live. And, of course, they both felt very guilty about what had happened to Sapper and the Major. So the cat with no name and the tabby mouse, who was really a cat, came to rely on each other. They even became friends, although in his hungrier moments Mouse looked rather longingly at his plump little companion, which of course made Tabby rather nervous. For shelter, Mouse decided that the best thing they could do was to move into the factory itself.

The factory building was enormous. It was as big as a cathedral inside and echoed just the same. Bits of old machinery lay scattered around the floor. Just underneath some dirty windows that were set into the roof, there was a huge crane that used to travel from one end of the building to the other. Mouse and Tabby found a small office tucked away at the far end and set up home there. Mouse chose the bottom drawer of a desk for a bed and Tabby slept in an old cardboard tube. They spent their time wondering how they could reverse the spell. Tabby thought it was impossible now that Sapper was – to use the Major's words – 'missing, presumed killed in action'.

Living on a diet of factory rat (which didn't appeal to Tabby very much), they became thinner and more bedraggled-looking by the day. They knew they couldn't go on like this much longer. One morning Mouse turned to Tabby and said, 'Look, this is no good. We've got to do something.'

'Like what?' replied Tabby.

'I think we should go and see your cousin.'

‘I’ve told you before,’ said Tabby in exasperated tone, ‘it’ll do no good. Sapper’s part of the deal, without him you can’t reverse...’

‘I know, I know,’ interrupted Mouse, ‘but if we stay here we’ll starve, anyway. Maybe there’s something she can do.’

‘You’re wasting your time,’ Tabby retorted.

‘Oh, yes? And exactly what important thing am I doing with my time, right now?’

‘Have it your own way, but I’m not coming!’

In a bad mood, Mouse set out on his mission to talk to Cymbelina, leaving Tabby to sulk inside his cardboard tube. He was still sitting there wondering if he could ever get used to being a small rodent when he was startled by a loud ‘clunk’ followed by a whirring and grinding coming from the factory. Warily, he crawled out from his cardboard nest and poked his head out of the office door. The factory looked the same as usual, but what was the noise that was getting louder all the time? It sounded now like a great rumbling of thunder and it was certainly coming from above. Tabby stepped out onto the factory floor and looked up. About thirty feet above the floor, the great crane was lumbering towards the offices. Swinging below the hook was a large metal pipe that seemed to be suspended by a single old strap. Just as the crane’s hook with its dangling load came overhead, the crane’s wheels hit the end of the runners and the machine juddered to a halt. But the pipe wanted to keep going. It swung forward on the strap and found it could go no further. Then, like a giant pendulum, it swung back again and was just starting to try to progress once more when the strap decided it could hold its burden no longer. As Tabby looked up, too shocked and frightened to move, the strap made a loud tearing noise and the pipe, free at last, headed straight for the ground – and for Tabby. With a colossal bang, it hit the floor. In fact, the open end of the pipe came down right over the top of Tabby, so that the petrified animal found himself surrounded by its metal walls. Above him he could see the crane hook still swinging wildly. He was alive but trapped.

As the echo of the collision died away, the sound was replaced by something quite different. At first Tabby thought it was just the ringing in his ears from the sound of the pipe hitting the ground, but no – it was laughter. And it was coming nearer. Then a face appeared over the rim of the pipe, followed by another. Tabby looked up to see Tony Blackhead and Christopher Christmas grinning down at him.

‘Well, take a look at that!’ exclaimed Tony.

‘It’s that weird mouse we found in the kitchen,’ marvelled Christopher.

‘I’d say that’s a definite bull’s-eye.’

‘Couldn’t have planned it better.’

‘It’s worth something, is that.’

‘What is?’

‘That mouse.’

‘You think so?’

‘I know so. Striped mouse? Jim Bray’ll buy that off us, no problem. Might get twenty quid.’

‘Cool.’

‘I’ll stick him in my pocket and we’ll take him down to Jim Bray’s shop at lunch break.’

‘And we split the money. Right?’

‘Maybe seventy-thirty. ’Cos I told you about the factory.’

‘Yeah, but I found out how to make the crane work.’

‘I’d have found that out anyway.’

‘Fifty-fifty, OK?’

‘Oh, OK. Help me get him out.’

Tabby was helpless. Two pairs of hands reached into the pipe. Christopher cornered him against the side of the pipe and Tony scooped him up. Carefully he stuffed the anxious but angry animal into his jacket pocket and pulled the zip up, leaving just a small gap for air to enter. Then from the dark confines of the pocket Tabby heard the muffled sound of Christopher’s voice. ‘Come on, or we’ll be late for the register.’ Tabby began to bounce and sway, and he realised that the boys were running out of the factory. He felt quite seasick and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 9

Mouse arrived outside Gudgeon's Second-hand Furniture and Bric-a-brac shop shortly after nine o'clock. It looked very dark inside. He tried the door but it seemed to be locked. Thinking he might be too early, he decided to wait and see if someone came along to open the shop.

Taking up a position across the street, he had a good view of the road and the shops. Someone arrived at Mr Stannard's carrying a black violin case, and another person came out of Jim Bray's Exotic Animals shop with a small glass tank containing a large and very furry black spider. But no one stirred at Gudgeon's. The church clock struck half past nine – and then ten. Mouse began to think that he'd come all this way for nothing when he happened to glance up. From the chimney on the roof above the antique shop a thin wisp of smoke curled lazily upwards; and behind the small dormer window that protruded from the tiles a dim light glowed. There was someone home.

Quickly, Mouse crossed over to the shop again. The front door was still locked and he now saw that there was a small card above the 'CLOSED' sign on which was written: 'This shop has ceased trading. So if you've come for money, too bad, we haven't got any.' So Gudgeon's had gone out of business, but Cymbelina might still be there in her attic room. How could he get to see her?

From across the road Mouse had noticed a small covered passage that opened onto the street running between Gudgeon's and the shop next door. It was worth a try. He made sure that no one was looking and then entered the passage. It was dark and damp and paved with bricks, some of which were loose and rattled as he walked over them. It opened into a small yard at the back of the shops, surrounded by a brick wall. A dustbin and quite a lot of what looked like old junk filled the space behind Gudgeon's. Attached to the main building was a small, single-storey extension that looked like a kitchen. Above that an old, rusty fire-escape ladder rose up to roof level.

With a clatter, Mouse leapt onto the dustbin, gauged the distance to the flat kitchen roof, and jumped. He only just made it and had to scabble over the gutter at the edge. All the shop backyards were visible now. He could clearly see the cages and hutches behind Jim Bray's. Looking up, the fire escape towered above him; the old house was very tall. It was going to be difficult to climb, even for an agile cat. Carefully, he wrapped his front paws around the first rung and then hoisted his back legs up. Then, rung by rusty rung, he pulled himself up. He passed the level of the first-floor window. It seemed to open into a storeroom, and the window was tightly closed. Just as he was coming up to the second floor he felt something move under his hind legs. Suddenly, the rung he was standing on gave way and fell clanging to the ground. Mouse's heart leapt with fear. He clung on with his front paws and heaved with all his might until his back legs found another rung. He realised that the rust had eaten right through the rung that broke, and there might well be others like it. He climbed more cautiously, testing each rung before putting his full weight on it.

The second-floor window, like the first, was firmly shut. Above him, he could see that the window at third-floor level was slightly open. If he could get onto the windowsill he should be able to squeeze inside. He was only a metre or so away when things went badly wrong. With a 'ping', one of the brackets holding the ladder onto the wall above him came away from the house. The ladder started to sway outwards and sideways as the rotten metal beneath him began to bend and buckle. Mouse looked down for the first time and realised just how high he was. It made him dizzy and very, very scared. Below him the yard looked tiny. Even though, like all cats, he could jump from a height and land safely, he knew he would not survive a fall from up here. The windowsill was impossible to reach, now. He either had to go down and hope that the ladder held or... he looked up; if he could just get to roof height, there was a ledge that ran around the base of the roof. The gap between the top of the ladder and the ledge was about two feet. If he could make it to the top he should be able to jump the gap – providing the ladder didn't move any further.

Mouse decided to go up; he was nearer the top than the bottom and it meant he wouldn't have to look down again. One paw at a time he moved up. The ladder creaked and groaned, but it held. Time seemed to stop for Mouse; the last few rungs took forever. But finally he reached the top, squeezing all four legs onto the thin, uppermost rung. The ladder was swaying slightly and Mouse was breathing hard. He was vaguely aware that the whole of the town was spread out below him. He tried not to think about it. Concentrating hard on the spot on the roof-ledge where he wanted to land, Mouse braced himself and, after a count of three, pushed off from the ladder with all his might. As he took off, he felt the ladder move in the opposite direction so that he didn't fly forward with as much momentum as he'd hoped. The ledge seemed impossibly far away and it felt to Mouse as if he were flying in slow motion. Somehow, his front paws found the stone ledge, but his hind legs didn't quite make it. They crashed into the wall below the ledge. Mouse felt no pain, just total fear. He held on for dear life with his forepaws as the rest of his body dangled. He knew he couldn't hold on for long and his strength was failing rapidly. Using his claws to try to get extra grip on the brick wall, he paddled furiously with his hind legs whilst pulling forward with the front ones. It was clumsy but it worked. Mouse managed to get enough of his body onto the ledge to stop gravity pulling him back over. Then he rolled over until he felt solid stone underneath the rest of him, and lay there panting for five minutes.

Eventually his breathing slowed and his heart stopped pounding. His legs were sore, but he wasn't badly hurt. What was he to do now? Cautiously, he looked over the edge of the parapet. The fire-escape ladder was sticking out at a crazy angle from the house now; it would be impossible to reach. His only hope was to try to get in through Cymbelina's dormer window – but that lay on the street side of the roof. He would have to climb up over the ridge. Mouse pulled himself wearily to his feet and began to climb the tiles, hoping that he wouldn't lose his grip. He was thankful it wasn't raining; the tiles were dry and not slippery. At the ridge he paused. The smell of smoke from the chimney was strong and a slight breeze began to ruffle his fur. He could see the church tower and the people on the street below, and just beneath him was the small tiled roof over the dormer. Now he needed to be extra careful; one false move and he'd be doing a good imitation of a pancake in the street below. Front paws first, he made his way carefully down onto the ridge of the dormer and leant over the

front edge. He was in luck, the window was slightly open. He backed off onto the main roof and came down the side of the dormer to the ledge. Then it was just a question of slipping in through the window.

‘My dear fellow, what a pleasant surprise. I get so few visitors. But don’t you think it would be easier if you rang the front doorbell like everyone else?’ Cymbelina, perched primly on her chair, seemed not in the least surprised to see Mouse standing on the table beneath the window. ‘Now you are..? Remind me again, will you, I’m so forgetful these days.’ She smiled, ever so sweetly.

‘You know I can’t tell you, Cymbelina. You took my name.’

‘Oh, it was a fair exchange. I think I gave you a very good deal. Mind you, I’ve been expecting you to come back.’

Mouse was curious. ‘You have?’

‘Oh, yes. I could tell you were the complaining kind. I said to myself, “Cymbelina, you shouldn’t be doing all this work for such little reward because he’ll only try to throw it back in your face”.’

‘I’m not throwing it back at you,’ Mouse replied. ‘There’s been some... some, er, unexpected developments, and, well, I need you to sort of reverse things.’

Cymbelina’s eyes flashed with fury. ‘Oh, you think it’s easy, don’t you? You come swaggering in here with some pathetic story about a stupid dog keeping the neighbours awake, expect me to half kill myself doing super-advanced level magic, and then think I can just wave a magic wand to put it back the way it was because you don’t like it anymore.’

‘Well, you can, can’t you?’

‘What?’

‘Wave a magic wand – or mix another potion, or something.’

‘Why should I?’

‘Because your cousin Tabby is very, very miserable being a mouse.’

‘Serves him right,’ said Cymbelina coldly, as she flicked her piggy tail.

‘But I didn’t know that’s what you were going to do.’

‘Oh, and what else was I supposed to do with your silly, silly name?’

‘I don’t understand. What had my name got to do with Tabby turning into a mouse?’ Mouse was confused and tried to reach down into the dark corners of his mind to remember...Cymbelina was talking again.

‘Anyway, if you want anything doing, you’re going to have to pay.’

‘You mean you will help me?’ Mouse jumped down eagerly and approached the chair.

‘I need the money.’

Mouse sighed and half turned towards the small fire that burned in the grate. ‘But I don’t have money.’

‘Nothing doing then.’

‘Isn’t there anything else I can get you?’ Mouse looked at Cymbelina, hopefully.

‘You seem very keen to help my dimwit cousin.’

‘Well,’ admitted Mouse, ‘it’s for me as well. I’m...’ he bowed his head. ‘Well, I’m lost without my name.’

Cymbelina was unsympathetic. ‘And I’m lost without money. You know why the shop’s closed?’ Mouse shook his head. ‘Old Mrs Gudgeon can’t pay the rent. She hasn’t sold anything for weeks. They’ll be kicking us out of here next week unless we can come up with the rent – and I can hardly set up this lot in a council flat, can I?’ She pointed at her books and jars. ‘So if you want me to help you, I want £500.’

Mouse was stunned. How could he possibly find £500?

‘Oh, and I’ll need the dog as well,’ added Cymbelina.

‘You mean Sapper?’

‘Well, I don’t mean the Queen’s corgis, do I?’

Mouse felt his stomach turn over. ‘But, I think Sapper’s...dead.’ He realised how hopeless this mission was. He was going to have to go back to Tabby and tell him he would be a mouse forever. And as for himself, he would just be the cat with no name.... and no home....and no friends. A tear welled up in his eye. Cymbelina fell off her chair. Laughing.

Amazed, Mouse watched as she rolled around the floor, cackling madly and mouthing the word ‘dead’. And every time she tried to say it, she set herself off laughing again. At last, wearying of her mirth, she wiped the tears from her eyes and grinned at Mouse. ‘Oh, my poor boy. You think he’s dead?’ she giggled.

‘Well, there was a dreadful fire at Major Barker’s house and Sapper hasn’t been seen since. I really don’t think you should laugh about it.’

Cymbelina picked herself up off the floor, walked towards the door and said, ‘Come with me.’ Too shocked to resist, Mouse did as he was told.

Cymbelina led the way out onto the attic landing and down a flight of stairs to the third floor. There she pushed open a door and Mouse was led into a room at the back of the house – the one with the open window. Cymbelina jumped up onto the windowsill and pointed with a paw.

‘See that yard down there?’

Mouse put his paws on the sill and looked out. She was pointing at Jim Bray’s yard. Mouse nodded. ‘That’s where Sapper is.’

Mouse stood, open-mouthed, staring at the cages. At last he said, ‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course I’m sure. I’ve seen him myself. And what a good job I made of his meow, don’t you think?’ She looked haughtily at Mouse before continuing. ‘Apparently, Jim Bray went to watch the fire down at Major Barker’s, heard this strange meowing coming from under a garden hedge and found one very frightened dog. Jim’s first thought was probably how much money he could make out of him. Should’ve thought of that myself. So now Sapper’s in one of those cages waiting for a special auction that Bray’s arranging. Thinks he’s going to make a fortune. By the way, you’ve made an awful mess of our fire-escape.’

‘So there’s still a chance,’ said Mouse, half to himself.

CHAPTER 10

Mouse stole along the tops of the brick walls to get to Jim Bray's yard. From there it was an easy drop onto the top of one of the cages. Mouse crouched down and peered over the edge into the cage. It took a second for what he saw to register with his brain. Then he froze, terrified, and all his fur stood on end. For staring back at him was the meanest-looking alligator he'd ever seen. To tell the truth it was the only alligator he'd ever seen and it scared the living daylights out of him, especially when it lunged forward, snapping its jaws and trying to force its head through the bars. Mouse jumped off the cage and twisted round in midair so that he landed facing the alligator cage. He wanted to keep that thing where he could see it. The reptile (which was actually only a baby) soon forgot about Mouse and settled back into its cage. Mouse looked around. There must have been at least fifteen cages in the yard. From where he stood he couldn't see into most of them, and so he wasn't sure if Sapper was there or not. Softly, he called 'Sapper, Sapper?' In reply he heard a faint mewing. It was coming from one of the cages nearest the back door of the shop. Mouse crossed the yard and looked into the cage, which was bolted and secured with a large padlock.

He'd never seen an animal look so sad. The poor Jack Russell was lying with his head on his paws, and his eyes looked so miserable Mouse wanted to cry. Suddenly, he felt so guilty for what he'd done.

'I'm going to get you out of there, Sapper,' whispered Mouse. Sapper just stared back at him, sadly. 'And we'll get you your bark back,' added Mouse, hoping that Cymbelina really would be able to do it. At that, Sapper lifted his head a little and looked quizzically at Mouse. 'Of course you probably don't remember me, but we used to be neighbours,' continued Mouse. 'Anyway, I'll be back. I've just got to find a way to get you out and rustle up £500 from somewhere. Don't go away!' Sapper's head sank dejectedly back onto his paws.

'You're up to no good,' said a voice. Mouse turned. Through an open window next to the back door, a large, brightly-coloured parrot could be seen with its head on one side, eyeing Mouse. 'I know mischief when I see it,' continued the parrot.

'I've just come to see an old friend,' said Mouse.

'You mean that weirdo dog? Well, you'd better hurry, he's going in the auction.'

'When is the auction?' asked Mouse.

'In about twenty minutes – when Jim comes back from the chippy. In the meantime, I'm in charge,' replied the parrot.

'Twenty minutes!' Mouse had not expected that. How was he going to be able to rescue Sapper before he was bought?

‘Yes, the shop’s already full of people – take a look. Everyone wants to see the dog that meows. Mind you, I don’t know what the fuss is about; we parrots can meow, bark and talk and no one gives two hoots about that.’

Mouse went in through the back door. He shuddered. Ranged around the walls were glass tanks in which large venomous-looking snakes slithered, and scaly lizards lounged. The parrot was right, there was quite a crowd of people standing around chatting and waiting for the auction. Mouse realised he had to come up with something soon. It was then that he spotted Tony Blackhead and Christopher Christmas coming in through the front door. What were they doing here? Had they come for the auction? He threaded his way through the forest of legs and took up a position near the boys. They were whispering loudly to each other.

‘What are all these people doing here, Tony?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, can you see Jim Bray?’

‘No, but if he’s got to serve all these people first, we won’t get to see him before we have to go back to school.’

‘Is the mouse okay?’

‘I think so.’

‘Well, make sure! He could suffocate in there.’

‘I don’t want to get him out where everyone can see.’

‘No one’s looking.’

‘All right, just a second.’

Tony reached in his pocket and to Mouse’s utter amazement pulled out a very hot and bothered-looking Tabby.

‘Look, he’s fine.’

‘He doesn’t look so great to me. You need to give him some air or we’ll not get a fiver for him, never mind twenty quid.’

The shock of seeing Tabby captive and realising that the boys meant to sell him knocked Mouse’s brain into gear. Suddenly, he had an idea. Mouse ran to the back of the shop and jumped up onto the counter next to the parrot’s perch.

‘I need your help,’ said Mouse, rather breathlessly.

‘What?’ replied the parrot without much enthusiasm.

‘I want you to call the two boys over – the two by the front door there – and then I want you to tell them something for me. Oh, and when you call them, make it sound like Jim Bray.’

‘Oh, you want me to do impressions,’ said the parrot, brightening at the thought. ‘I’m good at those. What are their names?’

Tony and Christopher were a little startled to hear Mr Bray calling them over to the back door. They fought their way through the crowd and were surprised to find that, instead of Jim Bray, a very talkative parrot confronted them.

‘I believe you have a mouse for sale. Is that right?’

‘Er, yes,’ replied Christopher.

‘It’s a very special mouse,’ added Tony.

‘I understand you want £20 for it, is that right?’

The boys looked at each other. A talking parrot might not be too unusual, but one that could read minds as well was altogether quite special.

‘Well, I think I can get you a great deal more than twenty – less my commission, of course.’

‘How much more?’ ventured Tony.

‘How does fifty sound?’

‘Fifty!’ exclaimed Tony. ‘You’re on!’

‘All you have to do is leave the mouse with me and go and fetch Major Barker.’

‘Are you serious?’ said Christopher.

‘Deadly,’ said the parrot. ‘I have something the Major will be very interested in and I’m prepared to swap it for the mouse. But you’ll need to hurry. You only have a quarter of an hour. And tell the Major to bring a photo of his dog.’

‘Sapper!’ exclaimed Christopher. ‘You’ve got Sapper, haven’t you?’

‘You have fourteen minutes. Leave the mouse on the counter,’ was the only reply Christopher got.

Tony was already pulling Tabby from his pocket. ‘Look after him,’ he called as he yanked on Christopher’s sleeve and pulled his friend towards the front door.

Tabby hardly had time to thank the parrot before Mouse appeared on the counter beside him.

‘Oh, am I glad to see you!’ exclaimed Tabby. ‘I’ve had just the worst morning. You wouldn’t believe...’ But before he had a chance to say any more, Mouse picked him up in his mouth and carried him down the counter.

‘What on earth are you doing? Put me down!’ cried Tabby.

‘OK, go for it!’ Mouse shouted to the parrot.

In his best Jim Bray impersonation, the parrot called out, 'Ladies and gentlemen, if I can have your attention please. We have an additional item in the sale this afternoon. If you would care to take a look at the lot being paraded on the counter right now, you will see something very special.' At this the crowd pushed forward, straining to see what was being offered. Mouse placed Tabby down on the counter, but kept him guarded with his paws. The parrot continued, and nobody seemed to notice that the voice didn't belong to Jim Bray himself, 'This rodent, a mouse with the most unusual tabby markings, is believed to be the only one of its kind anywhere in the world. Now what am I bid for this unique and, I might add, very healthy specimen?' There was a murmuring in the crowd.

Tabby turned to Mouse with a worried expression, 'What's going on; why am I up for sale?'

'Never mind now,' replied Mouse. 'Just do exactly as I say and everything'll be fine.'

Tabby was going to protest, but the parrot was already starting the auction. 'Now who'll start the bidding? Shall we say £100 to begin? Who'll bid me £100?'

There was more chatter among the crowd, but nobody seemed to want to start the bidding.

'Now, come along, ladies and gentlemen. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity.'

A voice came from the crowd, 'I'll give you twenty-five.'

'Twenty-five!' The parrot's voice was incredulous. 'Twenty-five pounds for a creature that David Attenborough would give his right arm just to see! You mock me, ladies and gentlemen. Come along, you can do better than that.'

Tabby tried again with Mouse. 'Look, I'm really not happy about this. I don't know what you're up to but I don't want to be a part of it. I'm off.' With that, he started to scurry down the counter. Quick as a flash, Mouse was on him. He pinned him down with one paw and then curled the other around him so that he was held in a small pen.

'See how lively he is,' said the parrot. 'Now I'm bid twenty-five, who'll give me fifty?'

After a second or two a hand went up. 'Well done, the man in the tweed cap there. Let's go for seventy-five.'

And so the bidding proceeded slowly up to £125, and there it stuck.

'It's not enough!' hissed Mouse.

'I'm doing the best I can,' retorted the parrot.

'He can dance,' Mouse ventured, rather desperately.

‘This is getting too weird!’ snapped Tabby. ‘When I get out of this, you are dead!’

The parrot was addressing the crowd again. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I don’t know what I have to do to convince you that this mouse is worth far more than you realise, but if I tell you he is also a dancer of some distinction, maybe that will help.’

There was laughter amongst the crowd. ‘Show us!’ shouted one man.

‘By all means,’ said the parrot. He whispered to Mouse, ‘Over to you.’

Mouse opened his mouth to speak to Tabby when his friend beat him to it. ‘Oh no! I am not doing it. Not for you, not for anybody.’

‘You’ve got to,’ said Mouse. ‘Unless, of course, you want to be a useless mouse for the rest of your life, living in a cardboard tube in a derelict factory.’

‘Oh, and just how will all this help?’

‘It’ll take too long to explain. You’ve got to trust me. Please, for both our sakes – and Sapper’s.’

‘Sapper’s dead.’

‘No, he’s not. He’s alive and well and about five metres from where we’re sitting now. But we’re running out of time. Do this and I’ll never ask you for anything ever again.’

Tabby glared at him, and then slowly stood up on his hind legs. The audience strained forward to see what was happening. Then, crossing his forelegs across his chest, he began to hop from one hind leg to the other. Mouse stepped back to let the crowd get a better look. Someone began to clap, then others joined in. Tabby began to get bolder and spun first one way and then the other. The crowd clapped harder and faster. Tabby danced rhythmically, in time to the clapping. He started to use the whole counter-top, twirling his way from one side to the other. Every few beats he performed a little leap. Now the crowd cheered. Soon the little creature was just a blur of movement. Finally he leapt high into the air and executed a triple somersault before landing back on all fours, panting furiously. The crowd went wild. Tabby even managed a small bow. Mouse was amazed.

‘I never knew you had it in you,’ he said.

‘Neither did I,’ replied Tabby, breathlessly.

‘OK, ladies and gentlemen, I think I’ve made my point,’ the parrot was saying. ‘Let’s get back to business.’

‘Three hundred!’ said one woman in a fur coat.

‘Four!’ said another.

‘Five hundred!’ offered a third.

The bidding concluded at £575. Tabby had been bought by the woman in the fur coat.

‘Payment to be placed on the counter-top please, along with your name and address,’ said the parrot, ‘and thank you very much for your attention. The main auction will be starting very shortly.’

Tabby’s new owner was counting out the money next to Tabby and Mouse when in through the front door walked Jim Bray carrying a bag of fish and chips. He could sense the excitement and stopped to talk to someone in the crowd. The parrot said, ‘O-oh, Jim’s back and he’s not going to be too happy when he finds out.’

Watching anxiously from the counter, Mouse could see that as he discovered what had been going on, Jim Bray’s rather pudgy face was turning red. Then he stormed towards the counter. Quickly, Mouse grabbed the address and £500, leaving £75 on the counter. Then he told a stunned Tabby, ‘Play dead, and if that doesn’t work, I’ll visit you at your new home.’ To the parrot he shouted his thanks and added, ‘Your commission’s on the counter. That should keep the boss happy. I’d better make myself scarce.’

As Jim Bray shouted to the parrot, ‘What the devil’s been going on here?’ and a rather embarrassed woman in a fur coat left the shop with an extremely cross Tabby, Mouse darted through the crowd and out the front door. Behind him he could hear the parrot screeching, ‘Your commission’s on the counter, your commission’s on the counter.’

Anxiously, Mouse scanned the street. Where were the boys? Jim Bray would be starting the auction of Sapper very shortly. There was no sign of Tony or Christopher. He needed to hide the money and get back as quickly as he could. He ran to the passage by Gudgeon’s, checked that no one was watching, and entered. He found one of the loose paving bricks and managed to lift it out with his paw. Then, he pressed the money and address into the hole and pushed the brick back. It stuck up a little, but wasn’t too obvious.

Back at Bray’s the auction was getting underway. Bray had Sapper up on the counter and was telling the crowd that this was the most extraordinary Jack Russell in the universe. Unfortunately, Sapper didn’t look extraordinary, he just looked miserable. The crowd was waiting to be convinced. Bray prodded Sapper in the ribs rather unkindly and Sapper meowed pitifully. The crowd gasped.

‘So what am I bid for this amazing animal?’ Bray asked.

The bidding began at forty pounds and moved swiftly up. Mouse arrived back at the shop just as the bidding reached £200. Nobody seemed to want to go any higher. Someone in the crowd shouted, ‘Can he play the piano?’ and everyone laughed. Mouse knew that the auction would soon be over. He was running out of time. Once more he stepped onto the street and peered into the distance. There was only old Mr Stannard coming back to his shop after lunch. Then, as a bus pulled away from the bus stop he saw them. A purple-faced Major Barker was striding up the street waving his walking stick, followed by Tony and Christopher, who were clearly struggling to keep up.

Mouse poked his head back through the door.

‘So are we all done at two-hundred and ten pounds? A give-away at that price, ladies and gentlemen. All done? Going once, going twice...’

Suddenly, it was as if a whirlwind had struck. People were falling to one side and the other. There was shouting and swearing. And at the centre of it all was, of course, the Major. Banging his stick on the shins of people who were too slow to move out of the way, the Major sliced through the crowd and appeared at the counter shouting, ‘I am Major Barker. That’s my dog you’ve got there – name: Sapper; rank: Jack Russell. Gone AWOL. Need to take him back.’

As he saw his beloved dog, tears sprang to the Major’s eyes. Sapper himself stood up and wagged his tail frantically – and started purring (a very odd thing for a dog to do).

Jim Bray was quick to grab Sapper. He snapped a lead and a muzzle on him and said, ‘Hold it right there. This is my dog, this is my shop and this is my auction. If you want to bid you’re very welcome, otherwise please leave the shop.’

Even though the Major couldn’t quite tell what Bray was saying, he could tell that he wasn’t going to give up the dog easily. Major Barker reached inside his jacket and pulled out a photograph.

‘My man, this is a photograph of my dog and you will see that it is indeed the same beast you have there. I will trouble you to take a look.’ He thrust the photo under Jim Bray’s nose. The shopkeeper, knowing he was on shaky ground, glanced briefly at it and replied, ‘It looks nothing like this dog. I came by this dog legally and you can’t do anything about it. Anyway, did your dog bark?’

‘What? Is my fog dark?’ The Major screwed up his face trying to hear what Jim Bray said.

‘I said, DID YOUR DOG BARK?’

‘Of course it barked.’

‘Hah, well this one doesn’t. I rest my case.’ Jim Bray looked extremely pleased with himself. ‘Now, ladies and gentlemen, shall we conclude our business? Are there any further bids?’

The Major, who had been purple-faced when he arrived, now turned as black as night. ‘THIS IS MY DOG AND I WANT HIM BACK,’ he thundered.

‘No chance, pal,’ replied Bray.

Then, just as it looked like the Major was going to do something very unpleasant to Bray, Christopher and Tony stepped forward from the crowd and Christopher said, ‘We both know this dog – he’s called Sapper and he does belong to Major Barker. He got lost after a fire at Major Barker’s house.’

Bray licked his lips and looked a little nervous. He said, 'You can't believe a pair of kids. They're probably after a reward or something.' Tony looked a little guilty.

Then someone from the crowd said, 'Let's have a look at the photo.' Others joined in the call and soon someone had grabbed the picture out of the Major's hand and was passing it around for all to see.

After it had been around the crowd, a very serious voice rang out from the back corner. 'Ladies and gentlemen of the jury have you reached your verdict?' It was the parrot.

Someone shouted, 'Yes m'lud.'

'Do you find that the dog belongs to Mr Bray or to the Major?'

A chorus of voices cried, 'The Major, the Major, the Major!'

Knowing that he was beaten, Jim Bray threw down Sapper's lead, shouted at everyone to get out of his shop and flopped down on a stool behind the counter to eat his fish and chips. The Major undid Sapper's muzzle, took off the lead, and carried him out of the shop, closely followed by the two boys, who were by now only thinking of the £50 reward that would soon be coming their way. Mouse winked at the parrot and slunk out of the shop with the departing crowd. He had work to do.

CHAPTER 11

There was no doorbell – well, not one that Mouse could find to ring. The only bell at Gudgeon's was the one that rang when you actually opened the shop door – and that door was still locked. There was no light at the dormer window and there was no smoke from the chimney. The place looked deserted. Mouse was annoyed; he needed Cymbelina now, but where was she? He ran into the passage and stopped dead. His fur almost turned white from the shock. The brick under which he'd hidden the money and the address had been removed and tossed aside. There was nothing in the hole. No £500 – nothing. Mouse could have wept. How could he have been so stupid to let the money out of his sight? Someone had probably followed him from Jim Bray's shop and watched him hide the money. It was all over. He had lost his chance of having the spell reversed. And what about Tabby? The first thing he had to do was find Tabby and help him escape.

Mouse racked his brains. What was the address that he'd seen on that paper? He was sure that it had been a house in Springfield Gardens. That was a street close to the school. But what was the number? It had a three in it, but that was all he could recall. Still, it was better than nothing. He set off at a trot towards the school.

The houses in Springfield Gardens were all large and well kept. There were tall trees lining the road and expensive cars in the drives. Fortunately, it was a cul-de-sac and there were only about twenty houses. If Mouse was right about the house number, it shouldn't be difficult to track Tabby down. At number three Mouse slipped through the bars of the gate and padded through tall, overgrown grass up to the big bay window at the front. He jumped up onto the window ledge and looked in. There was no furniture in the room and no curtains at the window. Reflected in the glass he saw in big letters the words 'For Sale'. He turned back to the garden to see an estate agent's board down by the front hedge that he hadn't noticed before. There was nobody living at number three. That left number thirteen.

There was a shiny new Jaguar in the drive at number thirteen and the lawn was cut short and neatly trimmed around the edges. Mouse walked up the drive, and just as he was getting near the house he was startled by a loud shriek. From around the back of the house a streak of black came hurtling towards him. It was followed a second or two later by a woman who was shouting at the top of her voice, 'My mouse, my tabby mouse – stop that cat!' It was the woman with the fur coat who had bought Tabby.

As the black streak shot past him, Mouse saw that it had something in its mouth – something that was wriggling and had a tail. Mouse also saw that the black streak had very green eyes. Cymbelina had found Tabby. What was she going to do with him? Mouse didn't dare think about it. Instead, he spun around and chased after Cymbelina. Over his shoulder he could hear the sound of the Jaguar being started and the squeal of the tyres as it reversed out of the drive.

Cymbelina was already at the junction with the main road. She hesitated for a second, then turned left towards the school. A few seconds later, Mouse reached the

same spot with the Jaguar close behind. He skidded around the corner and saw that Cymbelina was already past the school. Mouse raced after her. Then, just as she reached the porter's lodge outside the old factory, she changed direction and darted into the factory grounds. At the same time, Mouse heard the Jaguar's wheels spin as the car turned into the main road. He put on an extra burst of speed, but he knew that he would never reach the factory before the car – in fact it was now only a few feet behind and growling like a jungle cat. Just as the car drew level with him, he swung left through the school gates and into the playground. As he did so, a bell rang somewhere within the school. A second later, the door flew open and out poured a stream of children. It was the end of the school day. A moment later Mouse was weaving in and out of the children's legs. Some tried to reach down and stroke him, but he wasn't stopping. With a glance over his shoulder, he saw that the woman had got out of the car and was coming through the gates waving her arms and shouting at the children to stop the cat. She obviously thought that the two cats she'd seen were working together. The children thought she was mad and stopped to stare at her. Soon she was caught up in the crowd of children and Mouse was able to make good his escape.

He headed straight for the fence that lay between the old factory and the school. With one bound he made it to the top. Quickly, he surveyed the scene. Nothing. He'd lost them. But, no – what was that moving through the grass behind the porter's lodge? Mouse didn't hesitate. With a flying leap he was back on the ground and running towards the porter's lodge. He had to get to them before Cymbelina did anything dreadful. In the end, he was moving so fast he almost fell over her.

Cymbelina had stopped next to a garden shed behind the lodge. But where was Tabby? As Mouse swerved around the black cat to avoid knocking her over he shouted at her, 'What have you done with him? He doesn't taste good – he'll give you indigestion!'

Cymbelina looked at the worried, panting cat with her cool, green eyes. 'What are you talking about? My nincompoop cousin, if that's who you mean, is right here.' She looked down. Mouse followed her gaze and discovered a rather dazed-looking Tabby sitting in the grass. The fur behind his head was still a little wet from being carried in Cymbelina's mouth, but other than that he seemed to be fine.

'Anyway, what are you doing here?' Cymbelina continued. 'Can't I even talk to my cousin without being interrupted?'

'But how did you find him?'

'I read the address from that note you'd hidden.'

Mouse was amazed – and cross. 'But how did you know that was Tabby's address – and how did you know where I'd hidden the note – and where's the money?'

Cymbelina rolled her eyes. 'My dear, but rather simple friend, do you think I'm not aware of what happens in my street and in my own passageway? I use my eyes, I use my ears and I use my spies. And as for the money, that was a particularly

dumb place to hide it as anyone could have found it. I simply removed it for safe-keeping. And anyway, Mrs Gudgeon had to pay a bill in rather a hurry.'

Mouse was furious. 'But we had an agreement! That money was to be exchanged for turning Tabby back into a cat and for giving me my name back. You haven't done either of those things.'

'Oh, so impatient! Didn't I tell you that I would need that idiot dog to perform the magic?'

'Yes, but....'

'And isn't Sapper here in this house?' she nodded towards the porter's lodge.

'Yes, but....'

'And haven't I just rescued Tabby?'

'Actually,' Tabby spoke for the first time. 'Actually, that lady was rather nice and gave me a lovely cage with a soft bed and an exercise wheel.'

'Oh, so you'd rather I left you there, would you? So you could be shown off to all her friends as the cute little tabby-striped mouse that cost £500?'

'No, I was only saying she was kind to me. Which is more than you are, changing me into this in the first place.'

'And what about my tail?'

'I didn't mean to leave it like that.'

'Well, that's what happens when amateurs try to do magic. Anyway, that's why I wanted to talk to you. I need to know what you did so I can figure out what went wrong. Now if what's-his-name here would just leave us alone for a couple of minutes, maybe we can work out a solution that will make us all happy.' Cymbelina gave Mouse a look that meant, 'go away and stop being a pest.'

Mouse took the hint. 'OK, I'll go up to the main road and keep a lookout in case that woman with the Jaguar comes back. Are you sure you'll be all right, Tabby?'

'Yes,' said Tabby. 'We'll call for you when we're ready.'

Mouse left them alone. Tabby and Cymbelina could be seen with their heads close together, whispering earnestly. As she stooped towards Tabby, a small metal flask dangled from a collar around Cymbelina's neck and glinted as it caught the light.

Mouse walked towards the main road. As he walked around the front of the porter's lodge, the door opened and the Major came out followed by Sapper on a lead. They both looked so happy that Mouse was pleased that he'd managed to help them get back together again. When Sapper saw Mouse he even tried to greet him by meowing loudly. But it just sounded like nonsense to Mouse.

At the gates by the main road Mouse sat down and waited. There was no sign of the woman who'd chased them. A little further up the road, at the entrance to the school, a woman who Mouse recognised as Mrs Blackhead was talking to one of the teachers; she seemed to be a little upset. By listening carefully, Mouse could just make out their conversation.

Mrs Blackhead was saying, 'But I always pick him up on a Thursday because he goes to see his nan.'

The teacher replied, 'But he left here as usual when the bell went. He didn't say he was going anywhere.'

'But do you have any idea where he could be?'

'No, I'm sorry. I expect he's forgotten it's Thursday, and gone off playing with his friends. I'd give him a little while longer. And don't worry too much, I'm sure he's fine. Do you want to come inside for a cup of tea? We can keep a lookout from the headteacher's office.'

Mouse watched as Mrs Blackhead went inside with the teacher. He wondered what Tony was up to and hoped he'd got back okay from the auction. A couple of minutes later Tabby arrived to tell him that Cymbelina was ready to start preparing the magic.

'She thinks she can sort her tail out at the same time,' said Tabby.

'Well, let's hope she can sort us out, too,' said Mouse. 'So you two have made it up then, have you?'

'I wouldn't go as far as that – but at least we're talking.'

When they rejoined Cymbelina they found her looking very thoughtful.

'We'll need to find somewhere dark and quiet for this to work,' she said. 'And we'll need that dog, or something that belongs to him.'

'The Major's taken Sapper for a walk,' said Mouse.

'When he comes back we'll get him. You and Tabby create a disturbance and I'll get the dog.'

'There's a storeroom at the back of the factory we can use,' offered Tabby. 'It's dark and quiet in there.'

When Major Barker came back to his lodge, the three animals were waiting for him. Much to Sapper and the Major's surprise, a blue-grey cat jumped out from behind the fence and leapt onto the Major's back. At the same time, a tabby-striped mouse ran straight up his trouser leg. The Major shouted 'Ambush!', dropped Sapper's lead, and tried to reach around to his back with one hand and get to his leg with the other. Sapper just stood there looking confused. Before he had time to realise what was happening, Cymbelina had grabbed his lead and was racing towards the factory. The poor animal had no choice but to follow.

Mouse and Tabby kept up their attack until Cymbelina was well clear, and then Mouse shouted, 'OK, let's go,' and they both dashed towards the factory, leaving the Major shaking his fist at them and looking around for his dog.

The storeroom had no window and was lit only by a small skylight. It smelled of oil. Apart from a few metal drums that clanged if you knocked into them, it was empty. Cymbelina had slipped Sapper's lead over a pipe that rose up from the floor and was sitting opposite the dog, staring into its eyes. It was almost as if she had hypnotised Sapper. The metal flask was on the floor in front of her. As Mouse and Tabby entered, she motioned to them to sit down. Then she held the flask with her paws and pulled a small stopper out of the top of it with her teeth. Immediately a greenish light spread out from the flask to fill the room.

'Now,' she said, 'let's begin. Close your eyes.'

As Mouse closed his eyes he began to hear the same hissing and humming that he'd heard the first time Cymbelina worked her magic for him. He opened one eye and saw that the light in the room was changing from green to a beautiful pink. Sapper's mouth was wide open as if in the middle of a giant yawn, and Tabby looked like he was asleep or had gone into hibernation; he was curled up in a ball. Cymbelina turned her head towards Mouse and he saw that her eyes were again like giant pools, deep and wide. He shut his eye again.

The humming was getting louder. Sparks seemed to be flashing in front of Mouse's eyelids before bursting like fireworks into showers of silver rain. He was getting a little scared. All of a sudden he felt something thump into his chest. It felt like he'd been punched. He opened his eyes to see who was there and caught sight of Cymbelina floating back to the ground just as the pink light seemed to flow back into the flask. Then everything went dark and quiet.

Once his eyes had got used to the gloom, Mouse could see that Sapper had now closed his mouth and Cymbelina was whispering quietly in his ear. But there was something different about her. It took Mouse a moment or two before he realised that the loop in her tail had gone. It was now as straight as his own. Then he looked to the side and saw that instead of a small mouse curled up next to him, there was a large tabby cat snoring peacefully. So it had worked! Tabby was a tabby cat once more. But what about himself? Did he know who he was? Did he have a name? He thought for a moment and then it all came flooding back. He groaned as he remembered. Yes, that was it – his name was Mouse! How could he have forgotten? But any name was better than no name, and he cheered up at the thought that he would soon be able to go home and be himself again.

Cymbelina had by now finished with Sapper and turned her attention to Tabby. As she whispered in his ear he stopped snoring and began to stir. In a moment he was wide-awake. Cymbelina spoke louder, 'Well, cousin, it looks like I don't have to put up with the results of your sloppy magic any longer.'

Tabby yawned and stretched and spun his head around to look at himself.

'And I don't have to put up with yours either,' he replied.

‘Mine certainly was not sloppy,’ retorted Cymbelina.

‘OK, you two,’ said Mouse. ‘No fighting.’

‘Well, Mouse,’ said Cymbelina turning to him, ‘I hope you will tell everyone just what an amazing magician I am.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mouse, ‘amazing and *very* expensive.’

Just then Sapper gave a little yelp and looked very surprised.

‘OK,’ said Cymbelina, ‘we’d better get him home before the Major finds us.’

Cymbelina slipped the lead off the pipe and led Sapper out of the storeroom and back into the factory yard. Tabby and Mouse followed. They hadn’t gone five metres when Sapper suddenly pricked up his ears, sniffed the air, growled and refused to go any further.

‘Come on, Sapper,’ said Cymbelina, and tugged the lead. And then he was gone. He turned, snatched the lead from out of Cymbelina’s paws and ran headlong for the factory. At the same time he began to bark – and bark – and bark. And the barking was like nothing anyone had ever heard before. It was so loud that the three cats had to bury their heads in their paws to try to keep it out. Mouse began to wish they could have reversed the spell without giving Sapper back his bark. Within a few seconds Sapper had entered the main factory building, and now the barking could be heard echoing around inside that huge space so that it sounded like the building was the home of a thousand mad dogs.

Mouse shouted to Cymbelina, ‘What did you do to him?’

‘I just reversed the spell,’ she shouted back. ‘Something must have spooked him.’

‘Your spooky spells, I should think,’ said Tabby.

‘If you don’t like it, I can soon change you back. Or how about a slug this time?’

Mouse interrupted them, ‘Shut up, both of you. The Major’s coming and he’s got somebody with him.’

Sure enough, Major Barker was striding across the yard, and just behind him, trying to keep up, was the headteacher from the school. The head was shouting at the Major, ‘The barking’s coming from inside the factory.’

‘Advance!’ cried the Major. ‘Take no prisoners!’

‘We’d better go and find out what’s going o,’ said Mouse. ‘If anything’s gone wrong with the spell, Cymbelina, you’ll have to try and put it right quickly.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with my magic, I’ll have you know,’ snapped Cymbelina.

‘We’d better go anyway,’ said Tabby.

The three of them ran to the big factory door and peered in. Sapper was standing in the middle of the floor looking up and making a noise so loud that it would have been quieter to sit inside a plane’s jet engine. Then they saw it – the cause of Sapper’s irritation. Suspended from the crane’s hook, way above the floor, was a huge bucket. In the bucket and looking very frightened was a white-faced boy. It was, of course, Tony Blackhead, Sapper’s old enemy. Just then, the Major and the headteacher arrived on the scene. When they saw the problem, the head shouted in the Major’s ear, telling him to take Sapper away and call the fire brigade. The Major took hold of Sapper’s lead and dragged the still-barking dog out of the factory. When it was quiet (which took some time), the head called up to Tony and told him to keep still and stay calm. Then he asked him what had happened. Tony’s voice trembled as he spoke.

‘I was playing with the crane and the bucket, going up and down, and then I dropped the control and it smashed to pieces on the floor. I was so scared – I thought nobody would ever find me.’

There on the floor beneath the bucket was the broken control box.

‘Oh, Tony,’ said the headteacher. ‘How many times have I told all of you never to come into the old factory?’

‘I’m sorry,’ whimpered Tony.

‘Right, well hold on tight and the fire brigade will be here shortly. Your mum’s in the school and you’ll be going home soon.’

‘OK,’ said Tony, with a little more confidence.

The fire brigade was there a few minutes later and Tony was soon back on the ground and reunited with his mother, who was too relieved to be angry with him. The three cats waited out of sight in a corner until everyone had gone.

‘Well, I suppose that’s that then,’ said Mouse. ‘I think I’m going to head for home. What are you going to do, Tabby?’

‘I think I might try number thirteen Springfield Gardens. After all she did pay good money for me and treat me very well. Maybe she’ll be as happy with a cat as with a mouse.’

Cymbelina looked a little cross. Then she said. ‘It would be nice if, after all my hard work, my clients said those two little words. Is that too much to ask?’

Mouse said, a little guiltily, ‘Thank you, Cymbelina, and I hope you manage to keep the shop going and don’t have to move.’

‘And you, Tabby, have you anything to say to me?’

‘Yes!’ exclaimed Tabby. ‘Don’t you ever turn me into a mouse again.’

‘Well, you ungrateful little...’ began Cymbelina, but Mouse interrupted.

‘I’m sure Tabby is really very grateful for you turning him back into a cat, and maybe he’ll call in at the shop and say hello occasionally.’

‘Hmm!’ said Cymbelina.

‘Hmm!’ said Tabby, but they both looked at each other and Mouse could see that their eyes were smiling.

CHAPTER 12

When Mouse walked up the garden path at the Christmases it was Crystal who spotted him first. She came running down the path and scooped him up in her arms.

‘Oh, Mouse,’ she cried, ‘I’ve missed you so much. Where have you been?’ Mouse nuzzled her face and gave her cheek a little lick. He didn’t even mind hearing his name. He knew now that it was the only one he’d got and he was going to look after it. As she carried him indoors to be fussed over by the others, he noticed that the builders were hard at work repairing the Major’s house.

Everyone was delighted to see Mouse, but then soon forgot about him as neighbours arrived and excitedly discussed the events of the day. Slim Littleluck said that Sapper was a hero for finding Tony Blackhead, and they all felt a bit embarrassed that they’d wanted Sapper debarked. That night Mouse curled up contentedly in his basket in the kitchen.

The day the Major came home, he was welcomed by most of the people from the street. They all brought things to eat and laid out tables in the garden. The Christmases strung coloured bunting outside the house with a big sign that said ‘WELCOME HOME MAJOR AND SAPPER’. Mouse sat on the roof of the Christmases garden shed and watched the fun. Everyone had a great time. It was about three in the afternoon when Tabby paid a surprise visit and joined Mouse on top of the shed. Tabby told Mouse that he was now living in the lap of luxury at number 13 Springfield Gardens. He’d only had to stand outside the house for an hour meowing before the woman had taken pity on him and allowed him in. They were now the best of friends. And he’d even had a visit from Cymbelina, who said that she was still living at the shop as Mrs Gudgeon was managing to make ends meet for the moment.

Then it happened. Mrs Blackhead arrived with Tony to say thank you to Sapper and the Major. But as soon as Sapper saw his new visitors he opened his mouth and started – you guessed it – barking. Sapper just raised his head and barked and yapped and snapped and barked until everyone could stand it no longer. Soon the garden was empty and everyone had gone home to shut themselves in their houses – including Mouse and Tabby. The Major was left wondering why the party had ended so abruptly. It was dark before Sapper got so tired that he had to stop barking and go to sleep. Then the neighbours breathed a big sigh of relief and agreed that at least his bark was a great deal worse than his bite. So life in the town carried on as it always had done – some things were good, some bad and some very noisy indeed. But when something interesting happened – and it did from time to time – it was odd that Mouse, Tabby and Cymbelina always seemed to be around.