

THE DOLDRUMS

AND THE
HELMSLEY CURSE

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♦ SNOWFLAKES AND RUMORS ♦

The city of Rosewood was humming with rumors. They swirled every which way, across snowy rooftops and down narrow streets.

“How is it possible? It’s been two years!”

They were exchanged in shops along Howling Bloom Street and slurped in Belmont Café.

“Are you saying you think we’ve been duped?”

“What would they have eaten?”

They were laughed about in student rooms at the Willow Academy and gulped in handfuls at DuttonLick’s sweetshop.

“Weren’t there penguins on the iceberg?”

“You think they survived by eating penguins?”

It was a blizzard of rumors. They piled as high as the snow. There were hundreds of answers to one single question:

ROSEWOOD CHRONICLE

HOW DID RALPH AND RACHEL HELMSLEY
SURVIVE STRANDED ATOP AN ICEBERG?

Ralph and Rachel Helmsley were two of the city’s most famed residents—explorers, once presumed dead, soon to return to their tall, skinny house on crooked, narrow Willow Street. And there wasn’t a single person anticipating the explorers’ return home more than their grandson, Archer B. Helmsley.

“Archer’s dangerous. He set tigers loose in a museum just to see if he could outrun them!”

“I heard he can make acorns explode simply by looking at them.”

“No, that’s impossible. But he can turn a flamingo into a glass of pink lemonade when he’s thirsty.”

In truth, Archer couldn’t make acorns explode or turn a flamingo into a glass of pink lemonade. But with the help of two friends and a life raft, Archer **had** outrun a pack of tigers. It had happened two months ago, during a botched rescue attempt to find his grandparents—who’d been missing from Archer’s life since he was a mere two days old. As a result, for the past two months Archer had been living at Raven Wood

Boarding School. His parents had insisted it was for his own good. And to make matters worse, just before he’d boarded the train north, Archer had discovered his grandparents were not only very much still alive—they were also finally coming home.

So Archer had missed the first rumor spread through Rosewood and the first snowflake fall on Willow Street. And he’d missed the countless others that followed. It had been a particularly cold start to winter—the kind of cold where if you wrinkled your nose, it could remain wrinkled forever. The whole of Rosewood had become a white sea, and the snow only got deeper with each passing day.

♦ CLANKING RADIATORS ♦

On North Willow Street, in the cellar of house number 376, a boiler was hard at work, forcing steam into pipes that traveled up four stories to a top-floor bedroom, where a radiator was hissing and clanking and Adélaïde Belmont sat at her desk, writing a letter.

... I haven’t seen your grandparents yet.

But everyone in Rosewood is talking about them ...

Adélaïde paused and glanced over her shoulder. Her friend and neighbor Oliver Glub stood a few feet from her desk.

“I might be able to sled over to your bedroom soon,” he said, his face pressed to her balcony window.

Adélaïde joined him, both watching as snowflakes piled the secret Willow Street gardens high.

“I’ve never seen so much snow,” Adélaïde said. “Those garden walls are seven feet tall, but I almost can’t tell where one garden ends and the other begins.”

Oliver lived diagonally across those snowy gardens. Next door to him was Helmsley House. Archer’s house. But Archer’s bedroom was dark. And had been ever since the tiger incident.

“Do you think he knows what they’re saying about his grandparents?” Oliver asked.

“I can’t tell,” Adélaïde replied, returning to her desk. “He’s never written about it. And even if we **were** allowed to tell him, I wouldn’t know which rumor to begin with.”

Oliver didn’t know either. There were new rumors every day. And they were getting worse.

Adélaïde finished her letter, stuffed it into an envelope alongside Oliver’s, and said, “I’m ready.”

♦ THROW CARES AWAY ♦

At the front door, they pulled on their coats and wrapped their scarves. Adélaïde wedged a second scarf into her boot to fill the gap around her wooden leg. They trudged down the front steps and forged the sidewalk snow trenches. The sun

was gone and the stars were out and the lampposts lit their way.

“If I didn’t know any better,” Oliver said, helping Adélaïde over a snowbank, “I’d think we actually made it to Antarctica.”

On the corner, they passed a group of carolers.

Hark how the bells, sweet silver bells
All seem to say, “Throw cares away.”
Christmas is here, bringing good cheer.

They turned onto Howling Bloom Street—a winding lane lined with small shops, including a corner café that belonged to Adélaïde’s father. Bundled store owners stood high atop ladders, decking their windows with lights and garlands and festive displays while shoppers gathered to watch.

“Mind your heads!” Mr. Bray of Bray and Ink shouted as Oliver and Adélaïde dashed beneath his ladder. “That’s bad luck!”

When they reached Belmont Café, their faces were red and stiff, but inside, it was crowded and warm, with steaming cups of coffee all around. Adélaïde scanned the overflowing bar. The barman caught her eye and shouted, “TWO HOT CHOCOLATES, ADIE?” Adélaïde nodded and led Oliver through the buzzing café to a table in the corner. Oliver unwrapped his scarf and tilted his head. Adélaïde did the same. A newspaper had been left on the table.

