

## Chapter 1

On a summer's evening long before that rainy day, when the shop was still a locksmith's and Arthur's father had not yet been born, a new king sat alone in his palace in London and contemplated the future. His own circumstances were changing as quickly as the world outside. Across Europe, a general called Franco was fighting a civil war in Spain. In Germany, a former corporal called Adolf Hitler was planning a war that would set the world ablaze. In the United States a little girl with a squeaky voice captured the hearts of moviegoers, and in the West End of London a dashing adventurer called Simon Templar helped a fallen woman to her feet.

But none of this mattered to King Edward VIII. His empire was waning and his own thoughts had turned from politics and grief to love and sadness. It mattered no more to him that Shirley Temple had won an Oscar than it did that the first Spitfire had completed its air trials. But he knew that soon – very soon now – he would have to face up to the fact that he could not keep

both his love and his throne.

On the desk in front of him, *The Times* was folded open at a short leader article that discussed allegations about his friendship with a woman called Mrs Simpson. His fingers drummed a slow beat on the newsprint, gradually picking up the ink and smudging the headline. Further down the page, a seven-line snippet covered rumours of an ‘invisible detective’ called Brandon Lake operating in London. But the king had not read it.

Even if he had read the short article, he would not have cared that in a small room above a locksmith’s shop off Cannon Street the curtains were drawn. A group of people stood, sat and perched in silence and awe as they waited for the Invisible Detective to speak.

A single electric table lamp cast a dusty glow across the grubby wallpaper. It threw the silent figures into elongated shadows and deepened the gloom in the corners of the room. A stray strand of yellowed evening light crept in through a small gap between the mildewed curtains, illuminating impatient feet.

Behind the same curtains, Jonny Levin held

his breath and a fishing rod. He shrugged into the bay of the window to escape being seen. He strained to hear what the detective said, leaning as far as he dared in the direction of the old armchair that faced the window and kept its back coyly towards the assembly.

The chair was a faded burgundy, though you could not tell that in the gloom. Its seat had almost worn through and the threadbare wings that swept forward from the high back and helped to conceal its occupant were raddled with dust. All that could be seen of the person in the chair was the shadow of a hand. A hand that gestured and punctuated the detective's speech. A shadow that gave away nothing about the detective himself.

Jonny knew who was in the chair, but the atmosphere still infected him. He was dying to scratch his nose, but dared not move his hand. He was itching to take a deep breath, but knew that the dust from the curtain would make him cough. Above all, he was desperate to remain hidden. So desperate that he failed to notice the twitch of the material in front of him as another slight figure stepped silently behind the curtain; failed to hear the faint scuff of feet on the bare boards beside

him; failed to see the pale hand that snaked its way towards his shoulder until it touched him.

Then he gasped, struggled not to cough and bit his tongue to keep himself from crying out all in the same moment as he almost dropped his fishing rod. But Meg's hand held his shoulder firm and kept him upright. She shook her head in annoyance.

'Ah, yes.' The deep voice of Brandon Lake was muffled slightly by the curtains, but his words were clear. 'At our last consulting session, I recall that Mrs Simms enquired about her nephew, Andrew Baxter. It seems that he had been missing from home the previous night. This was unusual, but Mr and Mrs Baxter were reluctant to call the police. Mrs Simms, you will recall, persuaded them that my more discreet services might be useful.'

The room was silent. Everyone there knew what had happened. News travelled fast in this part of London.

'Is Mrs Simms with us today?' Brandon Lake continued.

'Over here, sir.'

Jonny strained to hear. The woman's voice was quiet and nervous.

‘Thank you, sir. You saved the poor lad’s life, you did, and no mistake.’

The reaction of the assembly was difficult to judge from where Jonny was hiding. There was some quiet muttering, but there was also a ‘shushing’ and a shuffling of interested feet.

Brandon Lake waited for calm before he replied. ‘An interesting case,’ he said slowly. ‘May I ask how the poor child is after his ordeal?’

‘Oh, he’s fine, sir. Leg’s mending, the quack says.’

There was a hint of satisfaction in the detective’s voice now. ‘I am only glad that I was able to help.’

‘That’s a bit rich,’ Jonny murmured. He knew who had done the real work.

Beside him, Meg dug her elbow into his ribs. ‘You know he means all of us, the whole gang,’ she whispered back. ‘Not just Arthur Drake. You and me too. And Flinch.’

Jonny did not reply. She was right of course. And anyway, the detective was speaking again.

‘Yes, a most satisfactory outcome for all concerned. Let us hope that Andrew makes a full recovery very shortly.’

Jonny could remember last Tuesday's excitement. Meg was right, they had all played a part.

The previous Tuesday had been cool and dry. The light breeze had whipped away some of London's stink and the sun burned off the early mist by midday. Art had spent the morning talking to the kids Andrew had played with on the Sunday evening, trying to discover who had seen him last and where. Georgie Thomas had left the boy behind the steelworks at All Hallows. They'd arranged to meet the next day, though Andrew never showed up.

But by then his parents were worried and the Invisible Detective was on the case. It was up to Jonny and Meg to retrace the route Andrew Baxter should have taken home. They looked a mismatched pair as they walked together along the narrow streets behind the steelworks. Jonny was slight, with thin dark hair slicked close over his head. His prominent nose and angular features seemed more pronounced given his relatively small size. He was not much younger than Meg, though she looked much older, being bigger.

Meg's bulky clothes hid the shape of her

thirteen-year-old body, and she always wore long sleeves and high-necked collars. She liked to cover as much of herself as she could. Her auburn hair was a riotous cascade that curled over her shoulders, the warm colour at odds with her usually sour expression. Jonny knew that when the sun shone through her hair, it seemed to glow – just as he knew that on the rare occasions when she did smile, her face lit up like a saint’s.

They had already walked from Andrew’s house to where he was last seen, asking if anyone remembered him – a nine-year-old boy, running home late for tea on Sunday evening. But nobody who was willing to answer could help them. So they turned round and started back towards Andrew’s house with lumps of disappointment in their stomachs.

There was a small yard just off the passage. High walls on either side, no doorways. Jonny could hear a rhythmic thumping from the direction of the river and he thought at first it was the steelworks or maybe the railway. But as they looked into the yard they found a boy kicking a scuffed leather football against the wall. He was perhaps ten years old, ragged and in need of a

wash. He waited for the ball to bounce on the ground in front of him, then punted it back at the wall.

Jonny made to move on, but Meg held his arm. She nodded towards the urchin. 'Maybe he saw the kid?'

Jonny shrugged. 'We can ask.'

'Ask what?' The ball bounced away into a corner as the boy turned towards them. 'It's my ball,' he assured them with an anxious expression.

'No, it isn't,' Meg said at once.

'How d'you know?'

'She just knows,' Jonny said. 'But that's not what we wanted.'

'What then?'

'Have you seen a boy?' Meg asked him. 'Sunday evening. About six o'clock?'

'Might have. What's he look like?'

'He's called Andrew,' Jonny said. 'He was playing near here, but he never got home.'

The scruffy boy laughed at that. 'I never go home neither,' he said. 'What's the point?'

'He's nine. With fair hair, lots of freckles. Wearing grey shorts and a white shirt.'

The boy went to retrieve his football. 'Didn't



know he was called Andrew.'

'So you have seen him.' Meg said.

'Now and again. Not sure about Sunday though. He stops to kick about sometimes.' The ball struck the brickwork, bounced. 'He likes to climb up the wall too. He runs along the top and jumps down into the next yard. Says it's a short cut.'

It took Jonny several minutes to haul himself to the top of the wall. The bricks were old and crumbling, so there were plenty of footholds, but the wall was almost twelve feet high. He hardly dared look down. Certainly he didn't intend to stand on the top, let alone run along. Instead, he sat astride the wall. The surface was uneven and large sections had broken away, leaving ragged edges like huge bite marks.

He could see down into the next courtyard and through to the street beyond. He could see the river on the other side of the wall. The ground sloped away, so the drop was nearer twenty feet that side. There was a stretch of wasteland down to the water's edge. Nowhere for a nine-year-old boy to be lying hurt. Except for the culvert. It was angled so that the large opening was in shadow. It

seemed to be an overflow, allowing water from the sewers or drains to run off into the river. If Andrew Baxter had slipped on the wall and fallen, he might have landed inside the dark opening, out of sight and goodness only knew how far down.

‘Hello,’ Jonny shouted. He cupped his hands round his mouth to try to funnel his voice towards the culvert. ‘Andrew, are you there? Are you hurt?’

‘Can you see him?’ Meg called up excitedly from below.

‘No. But I can see where he might be. If he fell.’

‘Can you get down the other side?’

Jonny considered. ‘No, I don’t think so. It’s too smooth that side and it’s a lot further down. The yard’s been banked up or something. Maybe it floods.’

‘So what now?’ Meg wondered, as Jonny climbed back down into the yard.

The boy let the ball roll away from him. ‘There’s a hole in the wall, you know,’ he said. ‘Over here. Lost a ball through it once.’ He grinned, and Jonny could see that one of his front teeth was a blackened mess. ‘That was my ball and all.’

The hole was at the bottom of the wall in the corner of the yard. It looked as if it was there to allow water to drain away, and Jonny could tell that the yard sloped slightly down towards that corner. He could see the drop to the ground on the other side – perhaps six or eight feet. He could also see into the culvert from here. And he could see what might – just *might* – be the shadowy silhouette of a small figure. He moved aside so that Meg could take a look.

‘That’s him,’ she said at once.

‘It might be,’ Jonny said dubiously. It was just a shape. ‘It could be anything.’

‘It’s him,’ Meg insisted. She was a year older than Jonny, but she wanted to seem older still. She was in charge of the Cannoniers. After Art, of course. ‘I know it is.’

Jonny hoped she was right, for the boy’s sake. But he also wanted to tell her that he didn’t care if she knew or not, if she was certain or just guessing. He wanted to tell her he knew about the bruises on her arm that she’d pulled her sleeves down to hide, that he would listen all day if she wanted to tell him why she never smiled, why she hated to go home.

But his thoughts were interrupted by the scruffy boy elbowing him aside so he could look as well. 'You'll never get through there, though,' the boy told them. 'You're too big. So am I. Never got my ball back.'

But Jonny was looking at Meg, and he could tell she was thinking the same as him. 'Flinch,' he said. And she nodded.

Buildings, pedestrians, street hawkers: all were a blur to Jonny as he passed them. His head was down, his arms pumping, his chest heaving. He could hear the shouts as he almost collided with other people on the pavement, but he hadn't the breath to apologise. He had to be quick. And he had to find Flinch.

He passed the station and was heading towards Southwark Bridge when he felt the flicking at his feet. He glanced down, swerving to avoid a woman in a bright green hat. His shoelace was slapping across the pavement with every step. It whipped up round his ankle as he raced along. He tried to ignore it, but in the back of his mind he could hear his father chiding him, telling him how dangerous it was. 'Could have a nasty fall.'

Only takes a moment to do it up.’

So he skidded to a halt at the end of Dowgate Hill and bent to retie it. As he straightened up and set off again he thought of Flinch, alone on the streets or wrapped in a thin blanket in the warehouse on Cannon Street where the gang met. Thought of how nobody ever told *her* to do up her shoelaces. Thought of her tear-smudged face and her stained clothing and how eager she always was to help. And before he knew it he was standing in front of the Cannoniers’ den, rasping for breath and hoping Flinch was waiting nearby.

It took him a moment to spot her. She was leaning against a wall on the shady side of the street. Flinch was a pale girl, small and thin. Her clothes were torn and grimy and her straggly blonde hair was stained almost brown. She stood so still that she seemed almost to blend into the cracked brickwork. She smiled as Jonny approached, her young face lighting up suddenly as her eyes widened.

He took a few moments to catch his breath, gasping out his news. Flinch nodded, serious now as she listened.

‘I’ll get my breath back and catch you up,’

Jonny told her. 'If he's there, we can tell the police and they can take a boat in. Go as fast as you can.'

'I'll be quick, Jonny,' she told him. 'Honest, I will.' Her whole body was shaking with anticipation and excitement.

The gap between the bricks was only about a foot wide. Flinch pushed and squeezed her body through the narrow opening. She could feel her left shoulder catching on the edge and wriggled until she heard a click. The loose limpness in her arm told her that the joint had dislocated. She edged forwards and this time her shoulders fitted between the bricks.

'That's neat,' a voice called from the yard behind her. 'Here, see if you can find me ball, will you?'

Arms out in front of her, Flinch clicked her shoulder back in and let herself fall forwards. She kept the backs of her knees hooked round the brickwork, reaching down towards the ground below. It was still a long drop – maybe three feet.

'You all right, Flinch?' Meg called from behind her.

'Yeah,' she called back, and let herself drop.

She broke the fall with her hands, rolling as she landed. The ground was damp and the long grass softened her impact.

Flinch leaped to her feet and ran quickly to the edge of the culvert. Carefully, she leaned forwards and peered into the shadows. She could see the light reflecting off the water as it rippled far below.

‘Who are you?’ a weak voice asked. ‘Are you the monster?’

‘Course not,’ Flinch said. She could dimly see the shape of the boy lying in the shallow water below her. ‘Are you Andrew?’

‘I seen it last night,’ the boy went on. ‘Lay very still, closed my eyes tight till it went. I think maybe I fell asleep. Perhaps I dreamed it.’ He paused, before adding, ‘Yes, I’m Andrew. Andrew Baxter.’

‘Are you all right?’ Flinch couldn’t see a way down, not safely. ‘I’ll have to get some help.’

The dark shape struggled to lift itself into a sitting position. ‘I think my leg’s busted. I fell. Couldn’t get out again. There’s a dead cat down here too,’ he said. ‘Stinks to high heaven. Who are you?’

Flinch was already turning away. 'The Invisible Detective sent me,' she said.

She just caught the boy's weak, faint words as she ran back towards the hole in the wall. 'Cor, 'strewth. The Invisible Detective!'



'How do you know my name?' Arthur stood frozen in the musty shop, caught in mid-turn.

'I have always known it.' The old man seemed surprised at the question. He picked up one of the chess pieces, a white knight, and peered closely at it. After a moment's examination, he blew off a mist of dust, nodded with satisfaction and replaced it on the clean round patch it had left on its square.

'What?'

But the old man clearly thought that his answer was sufficient. 'Did you know,' he said as he blew the dust off the other white knight, 'that the Invisible Detective used to hold his consulting sessions here?'

It seemed such a strange thing to say that Arthur was stumped for a reply. He shook his head.



‘Well, not here in this room, but upstairs. Oh, yes.’ The shopkeeper stared into the distance, the murky light reflecting off his thick glasses. ‘It was a locksmith’s shop back then, back in the 1930s.’ He nodded to himself, then turned to stare at Arthur through those pebble lenses. ‘But of course you know all about that. All about the Invisible Detective.’

‘No,’ Arthur managed to say, though his voice was a squeaky croak. ‘No, I’ve never heard of him.’

The old man was not listening. He was picking his way across the room towards a back corner. He paused long enough to beckon for Arthur to follow, then resumed his journey. ‘Over here, over here. Come on, come on,’ he called as the boy hesitated.

‘Why not?’ Arthur muttered. He could see the rain leaving tracks down the windows. If anything, it had got worse since he came in. He followed the man across the shop, trying to find a path through the dusty piles and the pieces of ancient furniture.

‘I’ve got something here that will interest you.’

