

Quantum Witch

Chapter One

The brown leather armchair swallowed her up. Part of her hoped it would never spit her back out. It was large. Comfortable. She felt safe in it. That was probably its purpose. A plate of biscuits and a jug of water had been laid out on the table in front of her. She didn't touch them.

The man in the chair opposite turned his folder towards her and pointed to the text on the front, **Morgouse Emilia PENDLEHILL, female, 13yrs.** 'That's you,' he said.

'It is,' replied Mouse.

The man gave a little cough to clear his throat. He took off his glasses. Cleaned them. Replaced them. A poke at the centre of the frame sent them sliding a little further up the bridge of his nose. It was as though he was giving her time to adjust to him being there. 'Well, Morgouse, I help—'

'Mouse.'

'Of course, Mouse it is. Thank you. I'm Professor Oscar Michael Goldstone.'

'OMG.'

It took a moment for her observation to land. She couldn't tell if it had amused him or confused him.

'Quite. You can call me Oscar if you want, or Oz. Either is fine.'

Mouse said nothing.

'I've spoken to your parents about—'

'They aren't my parents.'

'My mistake. Your *foster* parents. The third family you've been with since your biological parents died. You've been with these ones since you were... five?'

This professor hadn't made a mistake, and Mouse knew it. She'd been through it all before. Many times. He was probing, searching for answers without asking direct questions. 'Dad dead. Mum presumed dead. And my foster parents didn't just foster me,' she clarified.

‘Hmmm.’ The professor nodded. ‘I’ve spoken to them individually. They’ve been concerned about you for a long time. Especially since the incident by the lake. But you know that. So,’ he opened his arms as though introducing his office, ‘here we are.’ He poured two glasses of water, placed one by Mouse and held the other one up. ‘This is the information that your foster parents gave me about the lake incident.’ He set the water swirling then leaned over the side of his chair and poured every last drop into a plant pot. ‘There. It’s gone. I have no interest in it. There’s only one person who truly knows what happened. That person is you. And it’s you I want to hear from.’ He placed the empty glass back on the table. ‘Fill my glass, Mouse.’

For the briefest moment, she thought he actually wanted her to pick up the jug and refill his empty glass. He wasn’t exactly what she’d been expecting. Usually, therapy involved people telling her what had happened by the lake that day. People who hadn’t even been there. Hadn’t even seen it. This professor, Oscar, seemed different. Not that it mattered. In the end, no one believed her. No one close. No one far away. No one.

‘If it’s alright with you,’ continued the professor, ‘I’d like to hear things from you in a slightly different way, to try and bring new information to light. I think it’s worth a try. I’m confident I can help you, Mouse. I hope you’ll give me a chance to prove it.’

A handful of butterflies stirred in her stomach. He wanted her to talk. She hadn’t been much of a talker for the past seven years. If he’d spoken to her foster parents, he’d already know that. They would have told him she used to chat like a world champion. Up to the age of six, she thought her name was Bea Quiet. *Chattermouse*... that’s what Emmy used to call her. Chat a lot, hide a little. That was then. Now she mainly hid. In a way, she was hiding now, in front of this professor. Quiet. Small. Trying to disappear inside a snug leather chair. But, to find who she was looking for, she needed this man. She came out of hiding for a sip of water and a biscuit. The chair was comfortable. The professor was... intriguing. And the biscuits were tasty. So why not? A couple of big, therapy-word warning shots across his bows first, though. ‘Do you think I’ve been practicing self-deception?’

‘No.’

‘The psychological phenomenon of the invisible man?’

‘No.’

The professor's answer had been slower that time, less definite. No more big words needed. Her message had been received—*I'm no newcomer to this environment*. Of course, there was a slight chance she'd homed in on his actual diagnosis. Time would tell. Final question. 'So, do you think I'm just plain crazy?'

'Certainly not.'

Mouse gave a single nod. 'Then maybe I'll put something in your glass... Oscar.'

'Great. I'm glad. Okay, then.' Oscar took a pen from his pocket and slipped a notepad from his folder. He scribbled on the paper to make sure his pen was working. 'I know,' he said, glancing up. 'Pen and paper. I'm old school.'

Mouse shrugged. She made the most of the time by finishing her biscuit.

'Right, are you comfortable? Is it warm enough in this room?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Okay, Mouse. When you're ready, relax and close your eyes.'

All she could hear was the tunnelling tick of the grandfather clock. It was in the far corner of the room, next to the other man. He hadn't said a word when she'd walked in. Hadn't even looked at her. He'd just sat there, cross-legged on the sideboard, tapping his knee like he was counting a heartbeat. His blonde hair had reminded her of an ice cream swirl and, if his skin was the cone, it was the palest cone she'd ever seen. She contemplated opening her eyes and having a sneaky peek to see if he was still there, but the professor's voice pulled her back to the matter at hand.

His words following the tick tock rhythm of the clock. 'We're going to start by taking a few big, deep breaths. The first breath is the deepest.'

Mouse counted as she breathed. She was guided through ten breaths, each one shallower than the one before. The chair embraced her, cocooned her.

'Let your conscious mind drift, Mouse. You'll still hear me. Your unconscious mind will see to that because it's automatic. It looks after your body, keeps your heart beating, keeps you breathing—in, out, in, out, in, out. Just let it take over. It contains the same information as your conscious mind... maybe even more. So, let it take over. Breathe slowly and deeply.'

That's it. Each breath will make your muscles relax, make your body feel heavy, make your eyelids feel even heavier. Let them shut tight. Let them shut everything out. Let your mind wander. It's just us. Just a chat we're having. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. Your birthday Mouse. Breathe in, breathe out. Your birthday is on October the thirty-first, isn't it?

'Yes.'

'And your sister? She was also born on October the thirty-first?'

'Yes.'

'But she was older than you?'

Mouse was feeling so sleepy she almost missed the question. 'Is older. Yes.'

'Is,' echoed Oscar. 'Keep breathing, slowly and deeply. In, out, in, out, in, out. Drift further back into the chair now, comfortable, safe, allow your mind to drift back to that day by the lake.' The next sentence was pitched somewhere between a question and an instruction. 'You can talk about that day.'

'Yes,' said Mouse. And she knew she could. She was able to picture the day without... *feeling* the day.

'You're safe, Mouse. Just you and me having a chat. Nothing more. Nothing less. Keep breathing slowly. In, out, in, out. Let the sleepy feeling consume you. Completely relax now. October the thirty-first, all those years ago. Gently settle on that day. Float down to it like a feather falling from the sky, swaying to and fro, lower and lower and lower. Breathe in, breathe out. To and fro, to and fro. Land gently, on the grass. Look around. Where are you?'

'By the tree.'

'And what are you doing by the tree?'

'Watching my sister.'

'Good. Is she happy?'

'Yes. It's her birthday. It's our birthday.'

'How old is she?'

'She's big now. She's fourteen today.'

'And you?'

'Today I am six.'

'Is your sister far away?'

‘Quite far. She looks pretty.’

‘What’s your sister’s name?’

‘Emmy.’

‘And what’s Emmy doing?’

‘Throwing tiny bits of our birthday cake to the ducks.’

‘Wouldn’t you like to feed the ducks? Why are you by the tree?’

‘She put me here to keep me safe.’

‘Safe from what?’

A pause. ‘Zeros and ones, zeros and ones, zeros and ones...’

Oscar frowned as Mouse’s voice faded to a whisper. ‘Safe from?’ he repeated.

‘The water. We can’t swim. We shouldn’t go close.’

‘Is there anyone else around?’

‘Zeros and ones, zeros and ones... No.’

‘So, Emmy put you by the tree to keep you safe from the water.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’re both happy?’

‘Yes. It’s our birthday. The ducks are happy too. I want to feed them some cake.’

‘Did you tell Emmy?’

‘I’m shouting to her. I want to feed them. I want to feed them. Birthday ducks. She’s looking at me, smiling. Now she’s put her hands on her hips and she’s flapping her elbows backwards and forwards. She’s quacking. Silly funny duck girl. Now she’s holding her hand up to me. Wait. Be patient she’s saying. I flap my arms and quack too. I’m not patient. I want some cake. I do. I want to feed the ducks. I want to eat cake myself.’

A moment of silence.

‘What’s Emmy doing now?’

‘She’s bending down by the water’s edge. She’s placing a bit of cake there. Now she’s putting more crumbs down... in a line. She’s leading the ducks back to me! I love my sister.’

Oscar looked up from his notes, observed some fidgeting—a sign that the memory was becoming a little uncomfortable. ‘Is Emmy still far away?’

‘Yes. But she’s coming back. She is. She’s coming back to me. I can see... No. No! Who are you? They’re stopping her. They won’t let her come back!’

Fingers dug deep into brown leather. 'SHE'S NOT! SHE'S NOT! LEAVE HER ALONE!'

Oscar shot to Mouse's side, took a firm hold of her hand. 'It's alright. Listen to me. Leave those memories behind. Leave that day behind. Come back to me. Think about your hand. I'm squeezing your hand. Three squeezes and you'll be wide awake, and we'll be here, just you and me, chatting in my office. One, two and three. You're awake. You're here. You're safe.'

Mouse opened her eyes. She looked at Oscar, blinked a few times.

'You're alright. You're alright.' Oscar reached for a tissue from the box on the table and passed it to her.

Mouse wasn't quite sure what had happened. It took her a moment to realise there were tears streaming down her cheeks. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

'Nothing to be sorry about. You did great.'

She remembered thinking about that day, speaking about that day, but she couldn't quite remember everything she'd said. 'I didn't swear, did I?'

'No.' Oscar returned to his seat. 'And it wouldn't have mattered if you had. In my job I hear language that would make your toes curl.'

Mouse looked at her feet. She didn't really know why. It made the professor laugh. She noticed that Ice Cream Hair was no longer in the room.

'Take a moment.'

'I'm fine,' insisted Mouse.

'Okay, but I think we should leave it there for today. I need to go over my notes, get a few bits and bobs ready for when we next meet.'

Mouse couldn't tell if that was the real reason the session was ending. She had an inkling the professor thought she was too... *fragile*... to continue. Maybe he was right. Fragility was on her list of things to change. She noticed him circle something with his pen. 'What's worth highlighting?'

'Just something to review later. Nothing to worry about.' He closed his pad and stood. 'Right. I'll take you back through to your foster parents. I believe you're all staying here in London for a while before you go back to Lancashire?'

'In a hotel. Yes.'

‘Good, I’d like to see you again very soon. But let’s have a day’s rest. How about the day after tomorrow, erm... two o’clock, after lunch? We’ll confirm it on the way out.’ Oscar led the way to the door. ‘Do you have your own phone?’

‘Of course.’

‘Great. Here, take my card in case you want to talk sooner, or have any questions. Feel free to call or text any time, day or night.’

‘Thanks.’

‘No problem, Mouse. And don’t worry. We’ll get there in the end.’

When the girl and her foster parents had left, Professor Oscar Michael Goldstone went to his private study. He sat at his desk, opened his drawer, and took out a small flash drive. The drive had a day, a month and a time handwritten on the label in faded ink. Next to the date was a police reference number: *Friday, October 31st, 6pm, Ref. 6252204*. He plugged the drive into his computer. The screen flickered into life. The footage that came up wobbled and jumped and then smoothed out a little. It had been transferred from an old video cassette from an even older surveillance camera. There had been modern cameras around the lake area at the time, but for some reason they’d stopped working. He watched the silent drama unfold. A young girl came into view, just her head poking out from behind a tree. She stared for what seemed like an eternity. Three minutes passed before the girl stepped out into the open. At first, she was motionless, like a delicate little statue, but then her hair began to sway... she began shaking her head... her jaw moved, like she was talking to someone... shouting... no! no!... she glanced back at the tree, eyes desperate... then back towards the lake... fight or flight... she ran... towards the lake... and then into it. Oscar paused the footage. The wooded area was empty. The grass bank was empty. The lake was empty. The girl had been completely and utterly alone the whole time.