



Chapter 1

Rixon Webster was twelve years old and nothing in his world could surprise him.

He knew, for example, that when his mum's footsteps stopped outside his bedroom she wanted to talk. Even though his bedside clock flashed 23:17.

'Rixy, darling,' she said, opening the bedroom door. 'There's something I need to tell you.'

He grunted vaguely in reply. He thought about pretending to be asleep, but that never worked—his mum just perched on the bed until he stirred. In any case, Rixon had a 'responsibility' towards his mother now. That's what his dad said: a 'responsibility'.

So he fumbled for the bedside light and, as his eyes blinked open, he focused on his mum's expression.

She had made her lips all straight, and her eyebrows all low and frowny, so he knew what was coming. It was 'something serious'. In fact, if he wasn't mistaken, it was 'something sad'.

'Now, Rixon,' Mrs Webster began, 'I don't want you to be too upset.' Rixon sat up in bed, preparing to display just the right amount of upsetness. 'But I had a phone call just now, a very sad phone call,' his mum continued. 'There is just no easy way to say this, but I'm afraid I have to tell you . . . Uncle Silvester has died.'

This was the moment when Rixon was supposed to react, he knew that. There was just one problem: Rixon did not have the faintest idea who Uncle Silvester was. He thought he sounded a bit like a character from a play they'd done at school last summer. But it didn't seem right to mention that. So he just said nothing.

Luckily, it seemed as though that was just the right thing to do.

'Oh, darling. I can see how shocked you are.'

'Yes,' Rixon managed.

'I was the same,' his mum said. She was starting to bite her left thumbnail, which was a bad sign. She was getting anxious.

‘So, when did you last see him?’ Rixon asked hurriedly.

‘Oh, see him, Silvester? Well, not for ages . . .’ his mum admitted, ‘but I loved him when I was a kid. He was so funny, so crazy, but kind. I suppose that’s why I named you after him.’

Here was some news. After twelve years carrying the most ridiculous name in the school (if not the world) Rixon now had an explanation. Well, sort of.

‘You just said he was called Uncle Silvester.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, I’m not,’ he said patiently.

‘Oh no, that would have sounded silly. No, “Rixon” was his surname. He was my mother’s brother, my uncle, your great-uncle, remember?’

‘Oh,’ said Rixon, ‘right.’

‘But the point is,’ his mum went on, ‘that I am his last remaining relative; the closest one, anyway.’

Her eyes were fixed on him now, and her hands reached forward to grab hold of his fingers. Rixon couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen his mother so intense. But she didn’t look scared; now she looked excited.

‘So . . .?’ Rixon ventured. His mum’s nails were

actually starting to pinch his skin.

‘So that’s why we are going to meet the lawyer tomorrow.’



From the moment she swept out of Rixon’s bedroom, to the point when they boarded the train the next morning, to the very second when they stood outside the grand old brick building, there had been absolutely no mention from his mum that it was Thursday. She’d not referred once to the fact that Rixon was missing a day of school.

Rixon, of course, hadn’t breathed a word about it. He didn’t want to jinx it. But now he was starting to get worried. This was thrilling but it was also weird.

He looked at his mum. She was wearing a long red skirt he’d never seen before and a green jacket with a shiny gold brooch. She looked, he thought, a bit like an upside-down traffic light. But he didn’t mention it. His mum was glaring at a piece of paper in her hand and comparing it to a list of names inscribed on metal plates screwed to the front door.

Rixon checked his reflection in the adjoining window. His pale brown hair was behaving

better than normal; it had responded to furious combing before they left, but there was a curl at the front which always refused to stay flat. He couldn't see his freckles, but he knew they were there. According to Baz Khan at school, there were 101 on his nose alone, so he'd started calling Rixon 'Dalmatian'. Apparently, it was a Disney film about spotty dogs. Rixon thought there could be worse nicknames.

'Rixon, stop dreaming! Come on, we are going in.'

His mum grabbed the sleeve of Rixon's jumper with her left hand while simultaneously pressing a buzzer with her right. The huge wooden front door clicked open, and Rixon just had time to glance at the name alongside the button his mum had pressed before she dragged him through the entrance.

'Arnold Crump', Rixon read. He thought it was an odd name.

Rixon, in fact, only had a vague idea about what lawyers actually did. He had no concept whatsoever that Arnold Crump was about to change his life.

'Good day, good day, young Mr Webster. And may I thank you for making the journey,' the

man said from his seat behind a huge wooden desk, as they entered his office.

He looked, if Rixon was trying to put it kindly, unique. His face was lined and scrunched like screwed-up newspaper, and he was completely bald except for a dozen strands of white hair which sprouted from his scalp like question marks. But even stranger, he only seemed to want to talk to Rixon. He was ignoring Rixon's mum completely.

'I hope you're not missing too much on a school day,' Mr Crump continued. 'I always enjoyed Wednesdays, as we'd be permitted to use the main playing field for athletics. I hope you're not being denied a similar activity this sunny Wednesday afternoon, Rixon?'

'It's Thursday,' Rixon replied.

'Ah! It is? Oh, of course, it is.' Mr Crump leaned back in his chair and let out a guffaw which quickly became a coughing fit.

'Ahem!' Rixon's mum cleared her throat pointedly, when the din from behind the desk had subsided. 'Could we perhaps get on with this?'

She was wearing her fierce look, Rixon saw. Mr Crump noticed it too.

‘Ah, yes, indeed, Mrs Webster,’ The lawyer produced a pair of wire-framed spectacles from the breast pocket of his blazer and leaned forward slowly in his chair. ‘Of course, you had to come as well.’

‘I am here because you wrote to me.’ Rebecca Webster replied frostily, ‘I am here to find out what my dear uncle left me in his will, and I would sincerely like you to hurry up.’

‘Forgive me,’ Mr Crump said, as his glasses fell from his nose into a half-drunk cup of tea on the desk.

At that point, for a few minutes, the entertainment ended. Rixon tried to concentrate on the conversation between his mum and the lawyer but Mr Crump droned on with lots of long sentences which began with the words ‘legally speaking’.

Rixon’s ears pricked up when Mr Crump explained that his great-uncle Silvester had been some sort of explorer, who ‘probably made his money discovering jewels and relics . . . although nobody really knows’. Rixon also grasped that Silvester had met his death in a ‘boating accident’, which sounded intriguing.

But his mum wanted to know something

else, desperately. 'Can we please,' she said, just managing to control her frustration, 'get to the will?'

Arnold Crump looked at Rixon's mum and nodded slowly. He then turned his head towards Rixon, nodded solemnly again, and then finally looked down at a piece of paper on the desk in front of him. The lawyer cleared his throat.

'At the time of his death,' Mr Crump said slowly, 'Silvester Rixon was a millionaire. To be precise, he was more than that. He was—if you like—a millionaire two and half times over.'

Rixon's mum gasped so loudly Rixon reached out to grab her arm in alarm. He feared she might faint. Rixon knew that happened when people got a shock. He was feeling very light-headed himself.

'Two . . . and a half . . . MILLION?!' his mum spluttered.

'Indeed,' Mr Crump replied, 'and all of it was to go to one beneficiary when he died—his will is very clear about that . . .'

'Yes,' Rixon's mother said, already nodding her head enthusiastically.

'All the money has been left—' Mr Crump continued.

'To his closest living relative, his niece, Rebecca

Webster,' finished Rixon's mum.

Mr Crump, however, ignored her and kept on reading the sheet of paper in front of him. 'The money has been left,' he said firmly, 'to the North Niblington Society of Seagull Supporters.'

'Wh-what?!' stammered Rixon's mother.

'They have been advised,' Mr Crump went on, 'to use the funds—in part—to pay for a floating gull hospital, if this is feasible. This new facility will rescue any bird which is injured out at sea.'

Rixon's mum was staring at Mr Crump with her mouth open. Rixon could see her tongue poised midway between her lips, but she was making no sound. Her arms hung motionless in front of her, frozen like a statue trying to catch a ball.

'I take it, Mrs Webster, this was possibly not the news you were expecting?' Mr Crump suggested.

Rixon's mum had turned ghostly pale. She'd seen a small fortune placed right in front of her . . . and then watched it disappear in a puff of smoke.

'A gull hospital? A floating gull hospital? A hospital for birds? In the sea?' she whispered.

'Quite so,' said Mr Crump, who almost looked sorry for her. 'An idea that's ingenious, innovative, and, dare I suggest, almost completely pointless.'

Rixon was wondering what a seagull hospital might actually look like. Would there be gull doctors scouring the ocean nearby for stricken birds? Would they use jet skis?

His mother, however, was now turning towards the door.

‘Come on, Rixon,’ she said, grabbing her son’s arm, ‘let’s go. I’m afraid this has been a complete waste of time.’

But the lawyer, in fact, was not finished. ‘Mrs Webster, I urge you—in fact, I *instruct* you—to remain here until I complete the reading of the will. Or, if you insist on leaving, please allow Rixon to remain. It is vital that he hears what I have to say.’

Rixon planted his feet on the office floor and spun his head back round to the desk. ‘What,’ he said, ‘me?’

Mr Crump nodded more solemnly than ever. Rixon removed his mum’s hand from his arm.

‘Rixon, do you fully understand what a will is?’ Mr Crump was creaking his way to his feet as he spoke.

‘Yes, of course,’ Rixon answered. ‘I mean, it’s what people decide to do with their money when they’re not here. When they’re, well, dead.’

Mr Crump nodded, finally upright. Rixon was astonished to see him at his full height: the old man must have been almost seven feet tall, and the strands of hair on his head nearly brushed the ceiling.

‘You’re right, Rixon,’ Mr Crump said, ‘but you’re also wrong. What we are discussing here is not money. It’s something far more valuable than that.’

Rixon was vaguely aware of his mother groaning alongside him. ‘Only rich people think there’s something more valuable than money . . .’ Rixon heard her say. But Arnold Crump was not distracted.

‘A will distributes possessions, Rixon. The deceased person decides who gets what, you understand?’

Rixon nodded; of course he understood.

‘So, Rixon, I am hereby informing you that officially, that is to say legally, you now own . . .’

‘Yes?’ Rixon encouraged him. He was thinking his great-uncle, having been an explorer, could have left him a telescope. He’d often wanted one.

Mr Crump took one final deep breath, fixed his gaze directly at Rixon, and said, ‘. . . an island.’

There was a second of silence before Rixon’s

brain found a word in response.

‘What?’ he murmured in disbelief. He felt certain he must have misheard, or that Crump was joking. But the lines on the old man’s face were not turning into a smile.

‘What?’ his mum added in a louder voice.

‘An island?’ Rixon repeated, still expecting the lawyer to start laughing.

But Mr Crump was utterly serious. ‘Quite so, an island,’ he confirmed.

The lawyer was now reaching into a drawer on his side of the desk. He pulled out a large sheet of tatty paper and slowly started to unroll it. He placed a vase of dead flowers on one end and a huge dictionary on the other, to keep the sheet flat. Then he beckoned to Rixon. ‘Come round so you can see it better.’

The markings were very faint and the paper itself was yellowed and torn in several places, but Rixon knew what it was.

‘A map,’ Rixon said, ‘it’s a map. But it looks really old . . .’

‘This map was drawn up in 1792,’ Mr Crump confirmed. ‘It is extremely rare, very valuable, and, for our purposes, essential.’

Rixon watched carefully as Mr Crump’s finger

slowly moved across the map.

‘Gilberton—that’s where you live, isn’t it, Rixon?’

He nodded. It was the only place he’d ever lived.

‘Well, that’s where Gilberton is, roughly,’ Mr Crump said, tapping a fingernail on a blank section of the map. ‘It was just fields in the eighteenth century,’ he explained.

‘Oh, right,’ Rixon mumbled, trying to see if there was anywhere else on the map he recognized. The writing was so curled and conjoined that he couldn’t really make out any of the words. The only thing that possibly made sense was a jagged outline on the far right-hand side of the map.

‘Is that . . . the coast?’ Rixon suggested hesitantly.

‘Quite so,’ Mr Crump replied, ‘and that’s where I need you to focus. Let’s begin on the coastline and keep looking, travelling, as it were, eastwards . . . out into the sea. Now, watch closely . . .’

Mr Crump’s fingernail slowly traced an imaginary diagonal path, from the thick line which marked the edge of the mainland out into the sea. And then, just before it reached the very edge of the map, the finger suddenly stopped.

'Oh, blast!' he said, 'I've lost it again.'

Crump slapped the palm of his hand on the desk in frustration, and the vibrations made something rattle on the wooden surface. Rixon reached across the width of huge desk to pick it up.

'Would this help?' he suggested, handing Mr Crump a large magnifying glass.

'Yes, perfect!' Mr Crump exclaimed. 'I must have left it there this morning, when I was trying to find the island. Now, concentrate . . .'

The lawyer bent over the map holding the magnifying glass just above it. Rixon leaned in with him. He could hear his mother sighing as she lingered by the door. But Rixon had no intention of leaving.

'Aha! Got it, got it! Now Rixon, look here!'

Mr Crump creaked to one side so that Rixon could lower his own face over the magnifying glass. Rixon studied the map with his right eye; then he closed that one and used his left instead. The result was the same. As hard as Rixon looked, all he could make out was a tiny black speck. It was shaped like a comma, all on its own, surrounded by sea. Focusing hard, Rixon could make out the faintest of lines alongside it. It was an arrow drawn in pencil running from

the speck to some writing beneath.

There were two words, both still tiny even when magnified. The first one began with an 's', followed, Rixon thought, by a 'p'. The other letters were too smudged to be clear, although there seemed to be an 'r'. The second word had almost disappeared, but Rixon could make out the ending 'and'.

'S-P-R . . . AND,' he read aloud, 'and a few letters in between. It looks like it's pointing to a tiny, tiny island.'

'Yes,' said Mr Crump, 'a tiny, tiny island. So small, so insignificant, that from this date onwards it never appeared on any map ever again. But your great-uncle knew of its existence, even if no one else did, and he claimed it for his own.'

'What?' Rixon's mum said from the doorway. 'You're not serious?'

'Oh yes, quite serious,' Mr Crump replied, but he didn't turn his head towards her. He was looking straight at Rixon.

'It was his island—we have all the papers to prove it,' Mr Crump continued, 'and now . . . it's yours.'

Rixon felt his stomach suddenly lurch towards

the floor. But Mr Crump seemed perfectly calm, smiling at him, and using his most solemn lawyer's voice.

'Rixon Webster, it is my appointed duty to inform you that from this day forward, at the express wish of your great-uncle Silvester, you are the legal and rightful owner of that tiny speck of land.'