

The Trickster's Treasure

by

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*For Ashoka and her Nanis,
and for grandparents and grandchildren everywhere.*

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Chapter One

Nani's Arrival

I was busy trying to stop my parrot, Kiwi, from pecking holes in every mango Mum had just placed in the fruit bowl when Nani arrived. The door flew open with a bang as she exploded into the kitchen.

'Coco!' she shouted, sari swirling as she grabbed my shoulders and kissed me on both cheeks. Kiwi flew into the air in a flurry of grey feathers, her beak dripping mango juice as she flapped around the kitchen wailing like a police siren as she always does when she gets a fright.

Mum staggered into the kitchen behind Nani, dragging two ginormous suitcases. Kiwi swooped over her head to land on the curtain rail above the door screeching;

'Murder! Murder! Call the cops!'

'I thought you were only staying for a couple of weeks.' said Dad, putting a lid onto the tuna pasta he was making then hurrying over to kiss Nani on both cheeks before helping Mum with the bags.

'That's why I only brought essentials.' said Nani. She flung open one of the cases and pulled out tubs of pickles, chicken curry, vanilla teabags, preserved vegetables, and a stack of roti bread. I tried not to laugh as Mum's face went a funny colour.

'Aiyo! MOTHER! I *told* you not to bring food! You could have got into so much trouble at the airport. I asked Anishka to check your case!'

'That's why I packed *two* cases,' Nani laughed. 'Your sister only checked one. Besides, why would I get into trouble for feeding my family? You are all far too thin!'

Her bangles jangled as she patted her round tummy with pride.

Mum threw up her hands, sighed, rolled her eyes and shook her head all at the same time.

‘Rosy, stop Kiwi screeching before my head explodes, then help Dad take Nani’s things to her room.’

‘Merci, Coco,’ said Nani as I took some of her bags. Nani always calls me Coco – it means something like dear one in Creole, that’s the main language they speak in Mauritius – the tiny island in the Indian Ocean where Nani and my mum and dad were born.

Kiwi finally calmed down and settled on my shoulder to nuzzle my ear as I helped Dad drag Nani’s luggage up to the guest room. Scrumptious smells filled my nose as we went back downstairs. I popped Kiwi into the living room. Mum said cooking smells can make birds very ill so Kiwi knew she had to stay out of the kitchen whenever we made food.

‘*Poor Kiwi. Go to prison, Kiwi. Poor Kiwi.*’ she grumbled as she hopped onto her perch in her huge cage and tucked her head under her wing.

‘Don’t be so dramatic,’ I said, as she peeked out at me. ‘I haven’t even shut the door!’

Back in the kitchen, Nani had pushed Dad’s pasta aside to heat up some of her curry and roti. Mum had brewed a big pot of vanilla tea. Whenever I taste vanilla I think of Mauritius – its mountains, beaches, warm blue sea, palm trees, the breeze rippling through the sugar cane fields and, best of all, my Nani.

‘Manzer, manzer! Eat, eat!’ said Nani as she filled my plate. ‘This chicken flew six thousand miles to feed you. Don’t disappoint it.’

I tore off a piece of my roti and used it as a spoon to scoop up a spicy mouthful

of curry while Nani told us what all of my Mauritian cousins, aunties and uncles were doing now, who had got married recently, who had fallen out or made up with each other. It took a *long* time as Mum has seven brothers and sisters and they all have children. Kiwi flew in halfway through the meal and sat on the back of Nani's chair, bobbing up and down with her head tilted to one side as though listening to every word.

'So, Rosy, my Coco,' Nani said as she took away my plate and handed me a gateau patate. I bit through the warm sweet-potato pastry of the little pasty and the syrupy filling spilled out, filling my mouth with delicious squidgy coconut. 'We have seven whole days together, just you and me. What mischief shall we get up to together?'

'Mischief! Naughty-naughty!' screeched Kiwi.

Mum gave Dad a worried look, but he patted her arm. They were going to the south of France in the morning. Their first holiday alone since I was born nine and a half years ago. I hadn't been away from them for more than one night before, but I couldn't wait to spend time with Nani, she always has the best ideas for things to do, like building pirate ships out of cardboard boxes, seeing who can balance the most chocolate biscuits on their nose, or pretending to be secret agents and seeing how long we can follow people without them realising.

Mum and Dad were packed and ready to head off to the airport early the next day. Mum kept running back to the house to check that Nani knew how to contact them in an emergency, and which day the bin men came, and if she had the numbers for the doctor, the dentist, the hospital, the plumber, and if she knew where we kept the fire extinguisher. I'm not sure what she thought we were going to be doing to need all

those people while they were gone.

‘Let’s go!’ Dad shouted, leaning out of the car window and honking the horn.

‘Go-go-go-go-go. Allez!’ cried Nani, flapping her arms as she chased Mum back into the car. Dad blew us a kiss and accelerated down the drive before Mum could jump out again.

‘Bon voyage!’ called Nani as we followed the car to the street.

‘***Bon voyage! Bon voyage!***’ Kiwi squawked from my shoulder as we waved to Mum and Dad until they finally disappeared around the corner.

For breakfast, Nani made eggs baked into a spicy tomato sauce. While we ate we each made a list of things we wanted to do

My list had seven things on it:

Swimming at WaterSplash Land

Ice-cream at the seaside

Go on a boat

Horse riding

Egypt exhibition

Visit the red pandas at the zoo

Find a mystery to solve

I thought the last one might be a bit silly. I didn’t really expect to find a mystery, but Nani and I love watching detective shows together and I’m always looking for mysteries to solve, like who ate the last of my chocky-pop cereal, who always squeezes the toothpaste from the top instead of the bottom, and the real identity of the Tooth-Fairy – those mysteries aren’t very hard to solve, it’s always Dad. He laughs and calls me Rosy Rai, Private Eye when I present him with my evidence.

Nani had listed five things that she wanted to do:

Meet the queen

Ride on a tram

Pierce Rosy's ears

Afternoon tea

See a famous painting

Mum says that when you have a guest it's polite to do the things that they want to do, so I decided we would do something on Nani's list first. I thought the queen might be too busy to see us and I didn't know her phone number, so I put a cross next to that one. I didn't dare to think what Mum would do if she got home to find Nani had put holes in my ears without asking her, so I put a cross next to that one too. I looked at the other three things on the list and had one of my good ideas.

'We could do three of these in one day! Let's ride the tram down to the art gallery in town to see the famous paintings they have there, then have afternoon tea in their café.'

'Bien! Good!' said Nani. 'We'll do all of that today. But first...' she beamed at me as she turned on the television. 'Let's watch our programme.'

Every time Nani came to visit we would snuggle on the sofa together to watch an old TV show called Baldini Investigates. Baldini was a brilliant private investigator with a large moustache and an eyepatch. It was a bit strange because you always saw the person who committed the murder right at the beginning, then Baldini annoyed them with lots and lots of questions until they confessed. I liked watching Nani even more than Baldini, she would get very annoyed and bounce in her chair shouting things like: 'Liar! Don't you listen to him, Baldini! He did the murder!' or 'Look out Baldini, she's got a gun!'

'Bravo, Baldini!' cried Nani, sending Kiwi flying from her arm as she jumped

up to applaud the detective when he snapped handcuffs onto a film director who had finally admitted cutting the brakes on an actor's car.

'Bravo!' squawked Kiwi, before mimicking Baldini, *'You're going to jail, pal!'*

'Even Kiwi thinks Baldini is a genius,' Nani laughed. Kiwi let out one of her long cackles.

'OK, Coco,' she rubbed her hands together as the credits rolled. 'Time for our own adventure! Now, where did I put my handbag?'

We left Kiwi happily splashing about in a little water in the kitchen sink, something Mum and Dad never let her do. As we locked the door and walked to the tram-stop in the summer sun, little did we realise an adventure really was waiting for us!

Chapter Two

A Mysterious Painting

It wasn't until we were sitting on the top floor of the open-top tram that I really took notice of Nani's outfit. Over her green and pink sari she was wearing Dad's thickest winter cardigan. She had my rainbow scarf tied around her neck and her long hair was twisted up under Mum's bright yellow bobble hat. I looked down to where her feet stuck out under her sari. She was wearing thick, brightly coloured socks under her sandals. People were turning to stare at her as she crunched her way through a bag of sherbet lemons and waved merrily down at everyone in the street. She always wore cardigans at home in sunny Mauritius, so our summer must have felt like the arctic to her.

'Um, are you sure you're not too warm, Nani?' I asked, trying to ignore the annoying boy in front who was starting to snigger.

'Hot?' cried Nani, 'Coco, how you stand this icy cold weather I'll never know. Now put this on before you freeze.'

My cheeks were burning as Nani pulled out the frog shaped hat Mum had knitted for me when I was six and plonked it onto my head.

'Don't forget your poor fingers!' she shoved a pair of Dad's massive gloves onto my hands.

'There, nice and snug,' she linked my arm as I wriggled down in my seat. I stuck my tongue out at the boy in front who was practically rolling around in his seat laughing at the two of us.

'Oh dear, dear.' Nani tutted as she leant forwards to peer at the boy's nose. 'Poor boy, look at all those nasty spots! I have some cream in my bag that will shrink

those volcanos down to nothing. Now, where is it?' The boy leapt up in horror as Nani rummaged through her bag. He scurried off down the stairs and I saw him jump off at the very next stop. Nani winked at me. I waved down at the boy and stuck my tongue out as the tram ding-dinged then headed on into town.

'Who lives there?' asked Nani as we passed a grand old building with tall stone pillars.

'Nobody. That's Grenard's. It's a very posh bank.' When I was younger I liked to run up the steps to pat the heads of the lions that guarded the fancy entrance every time I walked past with Mum and Dad.

The tram rumbled on, past the market square, past the town hall with its colourful clock tower, past rows of shops, and up the tree-lined hill towards the art gallery.

It was eleven o'clock by the time we got there. I'd never seen the gallery so busy. We had to queue for ten whole minutes. Nani only had rupees in her purse, so I paid with some of the money Mum had left for us. My hands were very sweaty when I took off Dad's gloves to pay. I shoved the gloves down to the bottom of my backpack in the hope that Nani would forget to make me wear them when we left.

'Make sure you head to the main gallery for twelve noon,' said the man behind the counter, trying not to stare at Nani's winter clothes. 'We're revealing a new collection of artworks donated to us in Lord Harrington's will.'

'Lord who?' asked Nani as we wandered into the first gallery.

'He was a very rich man.' I told her. 'He lived in that huge house just outside town, Harrington Hall. He died a few months ago.'

Lord Harrington had been ninety-four years old, but I still saw him whizzing around town in his shiny old sports cars until the week before he died. On his 90th

birthday he held a huge party for everyone in the town who had a birthday in the same week. My birthday was two days before his so I got to go and Mum and Dad came with me. Harrington Hall was amazing. I'd never seen so many strange and interesting things in one place, not even in the museum where Mum worked as a curator. He had all kinds of weird ornaments and strange stuff he'd collected while travelling around the world, as well as lots of sculptures and paintings he had created himself. In his will he had left the house and everything in it to the town as a museum. Mum had been put in charge of getting the hall ready to be opened to the public. She'd been super busy for months and had to make lots of arrangements so that she could take time off for a holiday with Dad. She promised to take me to see the house before it opened to the public in a few weeks. I was excited to visit it again, but was sorry that funny old Lord Harrington wouldn't be there.

Nani had wandered over to look at a collection of paintings of serious looking people in fancy Victorian clothes. The gallery was very hot with all of the people there to see Lord Harrington's artwork, so I was relieved when Nani finally took off her scarf and woolly hat and let me take off my coat as we wandered into the next room. This one was more interesting than the first. It was full of illustrations from different editions of Alice in Wonderland. There were lots of pictures of the Mad Hatter's tea-party and some scary ones of the Queen of Hearts. My favourite was a brightly coloured painting of the Cheshire Cat.

'Ah! Now *this* I like,' Nani stopped by an ink drawing of a fat bird with thick legs and a large beak. 'This funny little bird, the dodo. You know it only ever lived in Mauritius?' I already knew this, mum had told me many times, but I pretended it was the first time I had heard it.

'It became extinct because it wasn't afraid of the first sailors that landed on the

island. It would waddle right up them and before long *all* of the dodos had been gobbled up, and the rats from the ships ate all the dodo eggs. There isn't a single dodo left!

As midday approached, we joined a queue that had formed at the huge wooden doors to the largest gallery in the centre of the building. Everyone went quiet as they watched the clock above the door tick away the final minutes. A loud gurgling groan broke the silence.

Nani patted her tummy as everyone turned to look at her.

'Waiting makes me hungry,' she grinned.

'Me too,' said the man behind us as everyone laughed.

Finally, the clock struck twelve. The doors swung open and the crowd poured through into a gallery filled with bizarre statues and colourful paintings. There were so many people I couldn't see anything properly, but there were lots of ooohs and ahhs coming from all around us.

'Welcome, darlings! To the first ever exhibition of Lord Harrington's life's work,' announced a woman's voice through the speakers on the walls as we were bounced around the room by all of the people coming in behind us. 'I am Carolyn Boyd, curator of this exhibition. Please, dear, sweet art lovers, prepare yourselves for the unveiling of our centrepiece, Lord Harrington's final painting.'

I held on to Nani's sari as she tried to squeeze through the crowd to somewhere we would be able to see the painting from. 'Pardon. Excuse me, please,' she called out. At first people wouldn't budge, acting as though they couldn't hear her politely asking to get through – then, amazingly, they began jumping out of her way. 'Merci! Thank you!' she called out cheerfully. I followed her through the path that magically opened for her, wondering what had suddenly made everyone so polite. My hand flew

to my mouth as I saw what she was doing.

‘Nani!’ I hissed. She had taken out her long wooden hair-stick and was using the pointy end to poke anyone in her way. ‘Stop that!’ I whispered as she jabbed a man on his bottom and he leapt out of our path with a yell.

‘Don’t worry, Coco.’ she smiled as she booped me on the nose with the little flower on the end of the stick. ‘It’s not very sharp. I call it my magic wand, it teaches people instant manners!’

I shook my head but tried hard not to laugh at the man rubbing his bottom and glaring around to find the phantom bum jabber. Nani lifted me up to stand on one of the benches in the centre of the room and at last I could see above the sea of people. Ms Boyd, the woman with the microphone, was standing on a little stage at the end of the room. She wore a tight black and white zigzag dress and lots of brightly coloured jewellery. Her hair was chopped in a sharp black and white striped bob. Behind her was a large painting draped with a velvet curtain.

‘If I could have your attention please, my chickens!’ she called. A hush fell over the crowd as they craned their necks to see. She cleared her throat and spoke like a Shakespearian actor. ‘Beneath this curtain is the most excellent, exciting, experimental exhibit in this entire room – the very LAST painting Lord Harrington EVER created. A letter we found attached to the back told us that the painting contains clues that will lead the seeker to Lord Harrington’s diary, the revelation of a great secret, AND...’ she paused, ‘A prize valued at HALF A MILLION POUNDS for whichever of you clever, darling little sausages deciphers the painting and finds the diary!’

The crowd whispered excitedly, Nani just looked confused.

‘Chickens, clever sausages?’ she repeated, staring at the gallery owner as

though she was a bit worried about her.

A spark of excitement flared inside me. A prize worth half a million pounds! What could it be? Jewellery? Antiques? Some of Lord Harrington's sports cars?

Ms Boyd was enjoying the reaction to her statement very much. 'Lord Harrington left me the key to his diary. Whichever of you dashing, daring, delightful detectives finds the diary must bring it here and once the great secret is revealed you will receive your reward. A prize beyond your wildest dreams!'

'I don't know about that,' Nani called up to me. 'I once dreamt I beat the President of the United States at a game of ping-pong and won my very own castle on the moon. I got to be queen of all the moon people.'

Ms Boyd had gone quiet. Everyone was staring at Nani again.

'They're made out of rocks, but they're very good at dancing,' beamed Nani. My cheeks were burning with all the people staring at us, but I couldn't help grinning at the baffled look on Ms Boyd's face, her bright red lips a tiny 'O' as her pencilled eyebrows almost disappeared into her hair.

She shook her head as she recovered from a dose of Nani, grasped the curtain and announced, 'Without further ado, my sweets, I present to you Lord Harrington's final painting, The Clue.' She whisked the velvet aside like a bullfighter and the crowd surged forwards to see the painting. Nani was getting shoved around so I grabbed her arm and helped her up onto the bench with me.

'Can you see it?' she asked, standing on her tiptoes. I shook my head, there were so many people around it, pushing and shoving each other, it was impossible to see anything. Everyone was desperate for a glimpse of the painting that could make them rich.

With everyone bunched up at one end of the room, Nani and I hopped down to

look at the other paintings and sculptures Lord Harrington had created. Nani laughed until she cried at a painting of five dogs disguised as a human. They were standing on each other's backs under an overcoat and hat, trying to buy sausages from a butcher.

'This Harrington,' she snorted as she wiped her eyes on my scarf, 'I like him. He had a sense of humour!'

Most of the pictures were funny. Mermaids sitting on a rock drinking beer and eating fish and chips, a bird unlocking its blue and white striped birdhouse with a huge key, a fire hydrant squirting water at a dog that had peed on it, a garden that had become a battleground as gnomes in red hats fought gnomes in blue hats. My favourite was a sleeping cat dreaming of chasing tiny humans.

The sculptures were interesting too. Many were made from scrap metal, but there was a long row of white marble heads on pedestals. They were human but so exaggerated they looked more like gargoyles.

'That one reminds me of my neighbour, Rajit.' said Nani, pointing at a particularly grumpy head that looked half caught between a sneeze and a growl. Opposite was a bust of a woman wearing a tiara. She had a gigantic nose and angry little eyes. I was enjoying looking at them but a loud gurgle made me jump. Nani's tummy had rumbled again.

'Let's have our afternoon tea now.' I suggested. 'We can come back and see the painting when it's quieter.'

'Lead the way!' said Nani shouted over her growling tummy.

The café was very quiet. Everyone in the building had rushed to see the painting when news of the amazing prize had spread. We had a big table in the window all to ourselves. We drank tea and munched neat finger sandwiches with the crusts cut off, delicious fruity scones with jam and clotted cream, and a variety of tiny

cakes. My favourites were the little orange macarons that melted in my mouth. Nani reached into her handbag, pulled out a small jar of tiny preserved chillies and spooned some into her tuna and cucumber sandwiches.

‘No thank you, Nani,’ I said politely as she offered me some. My cousin, Kushna, had once dared me to eat ten at once and I had felt as though my tongue was going to burn forever.

‘You’re very quiet,’ said Nani after a while. She felt my forehead. ‘Maybe you’re getting ill with all this cold weather?’

I realised that I had been staring at the teapot for five minutes as I ate, thinking about the painting in the gallery. I had wished for a mystery to solve, and here was one just waiting for us.

I leaned across the table, eyes shining. ‘Nani, do you think there’s any chance we could be the ones to find the diary and win the prize?’

‘Any chance?’ said Nani slapping her palm on the table so that the cutlery bounced and clattered on our china plates. ‘Why Coco, there is *every* chance. Together we’ll make a greater detective than Baldini himself!’

The café began to fill up as we ate the rest of our lunch and tried to guess what the prize and secret might be. Everyone around us was talking excitedly about the painting. Nani and I strained our ears to hear them. From what we could hear, the painting was a self-portrait of Lord Harrington standing in a room surrounded by lots of items that could be clues.

‘Did you see his hand?’ one woman whispered to her daughter. ‘His finger was pointing at a book with a rose and strawberry resting on it. He loved playing around with words, especially names. There’s not a doubt in my mind, the diary is at Roseberry Library.’

‘There was a map of the park on the wall behind him,’ a little boy told his mum. ‘There was an X drawn on the island in the middle of the boating lake. I bet it’s buried there!’

‘Did you notice he was wearing a tie from the old grammar school?’ whispered the couple at the next table. ‘I think the diary is hidden there.’

‘There was a picture of that actress on his desk,’ a grey haired lady told her friend. ‘You know, that one in the film *Casablanca*, Ingrid Bergman. I’ll bet you the diary is in Casablanca. Now, where’s Casablanca?’

It was very exciting to see everyone so caught up in the mystery. Nani’s eyes shone as she listened.

‘Now I’m intrigued,’ she said, popping the last of the macarons into her mouth. ‘OK, Coco. Time for our investigation to begin!’

Chapter Three

The Clue

There were still lots of people crowded around the painting when we went back to the gallery. We waited for about twenty minutes, but no one was going to give up their place as they searched for clues. I jumped up and down, trying to see the painting over the shoulders of the crowd, but it was no use. I looked around for Nani and had to stop myself from yelling as I saw her reaching out for the fire alarm. I grabbed her arm and quickly dragged her away.

‘Nani! You’ll get us thrown out!’ I whispered.

‘Only if I get caught. If you prefer, I could use my magic wand again?’ I grabbed her hand as she reached for her hair-stick and wondered if Mum and Dad realised I’d be babysitting Nani as much as she was looking after me. Still, when a very heavy lady stepped back onto my foot without apologising I was very tempted to borrow the magic wand.

I was about to give up and suggest we come back another day, when I had an idea.

‘Nani, could I use the phone Mum gave you?’

‘Of course.’ Nani pulled it out of her bag. ‘Who do you want to call?’

‘No one.’ I took the phone and opened the camera. ‘I just want to take some pictures.’ I held the phone above my head, pointed it in the direction of the painting and snapped a few pictures. I sighed as I scrolled through them, people’s heads were hiding large parts of the painting in every single one. I bit my lip as I looked at Nani and wondered if I was going to regret what I was about to say.

‘Nani, I need you to create a distraction.’

She smiled from ear to ear. ‘Like they do in the films? Leave it to me! Just give the signal and I’ll make a BIG distraction!’

I wriggled through the crowd as far as I could, wondering if I should be worried at what Nani was planning. When I had gotten as close to the painting as I could, I raised my hand and gave Nani a thumbs up, I wasn’t disappointed. She pulled out her purse which was bulging with small change. With a wink at me she tipped the entire contents onto the floor. Everyone turned at the jingling of coins rolling into every corner of the room.

‘Oh, my money!’ cried Nani. ‘Help me!’ she begged, scurrying around trying to pick up the coins. ‘Help an old lady, please!’ I tried not to laugh as she deliberately bumped into people, sending them stumbling into each other as she chased the rolling rupees. I could tell that no one wanted to leave their spot at the painting, but they looked at each other guiltily as Nani crawled across the floor calling for help in a pitiful voice as she scooped up the money. Finally one man bent down to help her and the others grudgingly followed.

At last, I got to look at the painting. I recognised the room as Lord Harrington’s study from when I went to his birthday party. The picture was very strange, full of items that could be clues. I could see why so many different ideas had been flying around in the café. I took as many photos as I could, zooming in to the areas that looked especially interesting; a clock with four hands and too many numbers, maps and notes on the desk and walls, a cat wearing a crown and a jade necklace, a pile of books under Lord Harrington’s right foot, the strange symbols on the rings on his fingers, the raven with a monocle perched on his shoulder. Everywhere I looked there were things that could be a hidden message.

Most of Nani’s coins had been picked up and people were starting to hurry

back to the painting. A tall man with a ponytail appeared next to me and began snapping dozens of pictures with a big camera. I stepped back and took one last photo of the entire picture and frame, then skipped over to Nani. She brushed down her sari and tucked the purse back in her bag.

‘You were brilliant,’ I said, giving her a hug. ‘Now, let’s go home and see what clues we can find in these pictures.’

‘You’re so clever, Rosy!’ said Nani, watching over my shoulder as I sat at Mum’s desk and transferred the images from the phone to the laptop then sent them to the printer.

‘*Clever Rosy!*’ squawked Kiwi, scurrying up and down the shelf above the desk. ‘*Clever Rosy, clever Kiwi, pretty Kiwi.*’

‘Bighead Kiwi!’ I said, jumping up to catch a tumbler of pens as she kicked it off the shelf.

‘Let’s go make some gateaux piments while the printer does its work,’ said Nani. ‘Kiwi can watch it for us.’

Nani had soaked some yellow split peas overnight then blended them together with spring onions, cumin, coriander and chillies. I could hear Kiwi shouting for us and barking at the printer in Mum’s study as I shaped the mixture into little balls and slightly squished each one with my thumb. Nani dropped them into a pan of boiling oil, scooping them out onto kitchen paper when they were crispy and golden. I fought the urge to take one while they were still steaming hot. Gateaux piments were my favourite snack but Mum and Dad didn’t make them very often.

‘*Poor Kiwi,*’ said Kiwi as I went in to get the pictures when the printer had finished whirring.

‘OK, come on,’ I patted my shoulder. Kiwi flew to it and we brought the pictures into the kitchen. I stuck them on the wall near the table as Nani whizzed some tomatoes, chilli, onion and coriander together in the blender to make chutney.

Sitting at the table, I broke a steaming chilli cake in two, splodged half into the chutney and bit into it with a crunch. Nani and I munched through the pile along with chunks of warm baguette as we stared up at the printed pictures of the painting, trying to work out the clues. Kiwi amused herself by running up and down the table whirring like the printer. I had bought a nice new notebook in the gallery shop and had already written down all of the suggestions we had overheard in the café. None of them sounded quite right.

I had added a few ideas myself, including Kitty Royal’s Chinese Takeaway, which I thought of when I saw the cat wearing the crown and jade necklace.

My eyes were starting to hurt from staring at the picture without blinking for so long. I went to the fridge and poured two glasses of juice.

‘This man, he was a joker...’ said Nani, as I sat back down. ‘Perhaps he’s playing a joke on all of us.’

‘You think that the diary doesn’t exist?’ I asked, clinging on to my dream of solving the mystery and winning the reward as it threatened to slip away.

‘No, no. I’m sure it exists, but maybe all these clues are just a clever trick. Detective Baldini always finds lots of false clues left by the villains. Maybe these are false clues. They could mean nothing at all.’

I chewed my lip as I leaned back in my chair and thought it over. Nani could be right. Lord Harrington loved playing tricks and surprising people. One year he was invited to turn on the town’s Christmas lights but didn’t turn up to the ceremony. Everyone was waiting, then suddenly the Santa Claus who had been sitting in the town

centre giving out presents to children all day jumped on stage and pulled off his beard, it had been Lord Harrington all along! It seemed likely that someone who enjoyed playing tricks so much could be playing games with us now.

I tried to look at the picture differently as I drank my juice. Some of the items looked more out of place than others. The cat wearing a crown and jade necklace, the raven with a monocle, and why did he have a picture of an old film star on his desk?

‘What was she called?’ I asked Nani.

‘Ah, that lady in the café mentioned her name,’ said Nani rubbing her chin. ‘It’s In... Ingrid Bergman!’

‘*In, Ingrid, in-grid, in-in-grid,*’ screeched Kiwi, chasing the lid of the glue stick across the table.

‘Shh!’ I said, taking the lid from her. ‘We’re trying to think.’

Perhaps the clue wasn’t even on the picture itself. I ran my eye around the picture frame, but it was fairly plain with no pattern other than raised equally spaced parallel lines all the way round. A little plaque at the bottom of the frame had the name of the painting and a date engraved on it.

The Clue

20 10

There didn’t seem to anything strange about that, except for the slightly too large space between the numbers that made up the year it was painted.

‘*In-in-grid, in-in-grid, in-in-grid,*’ Kiwi squawked as she pecked at my hand, trying to get the lid back.

‘Shush! Naughty bird,’ said Nani. ‘I’ll take her out of the room so that we can hear ourselves think.’

Then it hit me, right in the brain.

‘Wait!’ Orange juice spilled down my chin and onto my dress as I forgot to swallow.

‘You spotted something?’ asked Nani, mopping up the juice with a tea towel.

‘Clever Kiwi!’ I scooped her up and kissed her on the beak as she made kissy noises back at me. I popped her onto Nani’s shoulder, pulled the picture from the wall and grabbed the big ruler from Mum’s desk. I lined it up against two of the parallel horizontal lines on either side of the frame and drew a line right across the painting to join them up. Moving the ruler down, I joined up all of the horizontal lines then turned the paper around and joined up all of the lines on the top and bottom of the frame until they criss-crossed the whole picture

‘There. Do you see it now?’ I asked proudly.

‘I’m not sure.’ said Nani, rubbing her chin.

‘Maybe this will help.’ Starting at the bottom left corner of the frame and moving upwards, I numbered the points where the lines started from zero to thirty. Then across the bottom from left to right, from zero to twenty.

‘It’s a reference grid.’ said Nani, leaning over my shoulder. ‘Just like on a map. But we don’t know where to look. We need to find a clue.’

My heart sank. I didn’t even know if we were looking for an actual number, or if we were supposed to work it out from one of the clues. The picture was a jumble of clues, we might never figure it out. The painting was even called *The Clue*. I looked again at the date under the painting title. 20 10. The space in the middle of the year seemed rather careless of the engraver. My hand slapped me in the middle of the forehead before I even realised I’d moved it. The space wasn’t accidental, it was a clue, THE clue! Lord Harrington had practically told everyone the answer to the puzzle.

‘The date!’ I coughed. Nani looked puzzled as she scoured the picture, then her face broke out in a huge smile as she clapped her hands.

‘Oh, I see it. The Clue!’ she tapped her finger on the little plaque. ‘It was here all along! Square 20 10 is where we need to look! Bravo, Rosy! Tres bien, my Coco!’

I felt a warm glow at her praise. ‘Let’s see what Lord Harrington wanted to show us.’ I traced one finger along from the number twenty at the left side of the painting, and another from the number ten at the bottom. Where my fingers met I drew a little cross.

‘There’s nothing there,’ said Nani. ‘Just a wooden panel.’

‘I’ll bet it’s a secret panel and the diary is behind it!’ I said. ‘I know this room. I saw it when we went to Lord Harrington’s birthday party. It’s his study.’

Nani frowned. ‘We have the answer, but how do we get into his study to check if we are right? If the museum doesn’t open to visitors for nearly two weeks, someone may solve the puzzle and find the diary before us.’

‘Ah, but we have a secret weapon that no one else has,’ I grinned. ‘Mum!’