

# Maggie Blue and the Dark World

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## PART ONE

# 1

## WEST MINCHEN

Maggie was sitting in Sol's café, a cup of tea cooling beside her, only a few crumbs left of the huge slice of chocolate cake she'd just devoured. Beyond her flowed the dull afternoon bustle of West Minchen's high street: its pound shops, gambling shops, restaurants and newsagents. But Maggie didn't notice any of that. She was staring at someone. Her brown eyes were even wider than usual and a deep crease of concentration streaked down the middle of her forehead.

A woman was telling off her little boy for knocking over her coffee. Her voice was all agitated and angry, and the boy was crying. But the woman wasn't really angry about the coffee. If anyone had been taking any notice of Maggie – but then adults don't generally think kids can be doing anything of interest to them – they would have seen that the crease between her eyes got even deeper. She was trying to understand.

It wasn't the churning, wild anger Maggie had sensed in her mum when her dad left them. It wasn't really anger at all, or not entirely. It was more like the woman was overwhelmed. And suddenly, with a weird click somewhere in her brain, a piece of knowledge rose up to her so certainly, Maggie understood, she felt it. The woman had lost a friend, or someone very close. They'd argued or fallen out . . . or something. Beneath her anger the woman was feeling very lonely. It made tears well up in Maggie's eyes.

'What are you looking at?' The woman had noticed her. Maggie's mouth opened but no sound came out – how could she explain? Maggie felt sweat cluster under her armpits and blood rush to her cheeks as she flushed bright red.

The woman put her arm round her son. 'Stop staring at us like that. It's rude.' They were united now, the two of them against her, their fight forgotten.

And then Maggie felt that other familiar red begin to surge through her. Why did people have to make you feel bad? She'd only wanted to help. Maggie shoved her chair back so hard when she stood up that it was only stopped from falling by an adjacent table. Then she stalked out of the café slamming the door behind her, but not fast enough to miss the woman mutter, 'Weird kid.'

Maggie hurried back through the darkening streets, past all the terraced houses squashed together with yellow light

spilling out. She was late. Not for her Aunt Esme, who didn't care when she got home or what she did or why, but for her mum. For their weekly phone call: five p.m. every Thursday.

She cut through the alleyway down the side of the church emerging onto the crescent of identical fancy houses that led back onto the main road and to Milton Lodge. It was a big haunted-looking place set back from the road by a moss-covered gravel drive where water often gathered in huge pools after the rain. Her aunt lived here in a one-bedroom garden flat. Maggie trudged up to the door.

Winter darkness had fallen very suddenly, like it always did, and the Lodge's welcome light had stopped working. But she could still make out the contented fat lump of the one-eyed tabby cat who seemed to belong to no one, but who often sat on the doormat of the Lodge.

Maggie touched his warm fur as she went past. The old cat purred briefly but powerfully, and looked up at her, hopeful she'd allow him indoors and out of the cold.

'I'm sorry, cat. You know Esme hates you. *I* would let you in.'

It was weird because Esme seemed relaxed about everything *but* this cat. He was a battered-up old beast, a retired street fighter by the looks of his torn scraggy ears. But because of his one eye, it always looked like he was winking at her in a jovial sort of way. And she swore that sometimes she could hear him humming a tune beneath

his purr, like a little jazz melody. But then she often imagined things that weren't real.

'Maybe tomorrow.'

This seemed to satisfy him, and he lowered his rotund head and went back to watching the cars race past on the dark narrow road beyond.

As soon as she got into the drab dusty hallway, Maggie heard the phone ringing.

'Damn!' She rushed to unlock the door of Flat 1. But there was a knack to jiggling the key in the lock and in her haste it got stuck. Meanwhile the rings seemed to get shriller and shriller. She could hear her mother's thoughts: *I can't rely on that girl for anything. She's useless.*

Finally the door flew open. Maggie raced into the living room and picked up the old black dial phone, probably the only one still in use and not in a museum.

'Hello?'

'So you are there? I didn't think you were going to pick up.'

'I was . . . having a bath.' Maggie wasn't sure why she lied, but she often did to her mum. It was a habit, self-preservation.

'You know we talk at five p.m. every Thursday. It's the only thing I ask.'

'I didn't realise it was so late.'

'And don't be using all of Esme's hot water. A bath at five?'

‘Sorry.’

‘Don’t apologise to me. It’s Esme’s water.’

There was a long pause in which Cynthia Brown would be dredging up what the counsellor had told them about how they could try and communicate better with each other.

‘How’s school this week?’ she said after a while.

‘It’s great.’

‘And you’re enjoying your classes?’

‘Yes.’ Now Maggie paused – she had to keep this vaguely believable. ‘Except maths. And I hate French. But otherwise, it’s OK.’

‘And you’re getting good marks?’

‘Yeah, pretty good.’ It could wait till the end of term for her mum to find out the truth.

‘And you’ve got friends? It’s hard joining a new school in the second year, especially a few weeks into term.’ She must be reading from notes.

‘Everyone’s really nice,’ Maggie parroted in response.

‘Well, that’s certainly lucky for you.’ A little of the real Cynthia Brown, the one Maggie was currently more familiar with, had crept back in, but she was soon back on track. ‘You would tell me if anything was wrong, wouldn’t you? You know you can always talk to me.’

Maggie sighed inwardly. Why did adults ever even say that? OK then: *I hate it here. I miss home. I miss the sea. I hate school. I don’t have a single friend, and you know*



*what? I don't want one. I'm here in this drab suburban place with my crazy aunt, the one Dad always told me everyone in the family hated, in her tiny flat because you can't cope with the simplest things like getting out of bed and going to the supermarket.*

Or what if she just said she was finding things hard? What would she get? *I don't think that's a very good attitude. You won't make friends like that. You're very lucky that Esme could take you in. You never think of me, etc, etc.*

So she just said, 'I know, Mum. Thanks.'

There was another long pause. 'And has your father been in touch?' Cynthia's voice instantly got tighter just mentioning him.

'No.'

'You're sure?'

Maggie sighed. 'I'm sure.'

'He said he was going to visit you, and I made one thing clear to him: he is not to bring that woman with him.'

'He hasn't visited. He hasn't even phoned me.'

'But just to be clear, *that woman* is not to take a step inside your aunt's house.'

After the call, Maggie sat on the edge of the sofa and let the darkness in the cluttered room grow around her. Esme was something of a hoarder and the huge old sofa Maggie slept on was covered in sheet music, books and old newspapers by day. She had to move it all off before she went to

sleep. The room smelt of corners not dusted and old books rotting quietly.

For some unexplained reason, Esme also kept a huge stuffed owl in a case on top of her upright piano. It stared at you wherever you were in the room. Those huge yellow eyes, like marbles, made Maggie feel sad. The owl's expression was fierce, but it was dead and stuffed and living in a dusty case in West Minchen. Surely not what it had imagined when it had flown out hunting on moonlit nights.

Beyond its frozen pointed ears, the garden was huge and overgrown, a relic from when Milton Lodge had been the home of a wealthy family, and there'd been nothing around it but fields. Esme said that before it all got cut down to build the suburbs, Everfall Woods had grown right up to the edge of the crumbling wall that still stood, just about, at the end of the communal garden.

The wall had fallen down in a storm a few years ago and no one had bothered to fix it. The one-eyed cat sat on its ruins sometimes, forever winking, and the foxes that slept in the tall overgrown grass would scuttle over it if you disturbed them.

Maggie opened the back door and stepped out. It was completely dark at ground level but the huge oak and smaller trees around it were silhouetted against a dark blue sky. She inhaled the cold air.

There was something about this place that wasn't right. She could sense it lurking just behind the neatly-paved

drives with the sleek black cars silently parked and the perfect soft-carpeted homes. Something, not wrong exactly, but which made her skin tingle, something strange.

A voice rang out into the darkness, 'Maggie?'

She went back inside and closed the door.

Esme had arrived home and was brewing tea in the narrow kitchen. Maggie watched her through the quaint hatch cut into the wall to connect the two rooms. Her aunt wore her hair in a solid beehive, and toxic levels of hair-spray often hung in the air in the mornings before Maggie left for school. The front was dyed metallic reddish brown but the back was grey, as if she couldn't reach or see it properly in the mirror.

Esme brought the tea through on a tray with a jar of biscuits and placed them on the little round table where they shared the occasional meal. She sat down, tapped out a cigarette and began smoking in the efficient yet movie-star way she had: little puffs out of the side of her mouth, a precise tap-tap into an ashtray, her beehived head slightly tilted, as if she suspected a camera might be rolling and she wanted it to capture her best angles. Her mum would hate that Esme smoked, let alone smoked in the flat. But then, what could she do about it anyway?

Maggie didn't remember, but apparently she'd met Esme once when she was small. Her aunt had been the very early, and very unwanted, child of Grandma Muriel before she was married. Esme had a different father to Maggie's dad,

was fifteen years older and had grown up abroad. Maggie's parents didn't like Esme, until they needed her, and then they still didn't actually like her.

But Maggie did. She was different to anyone else she'd met. She was odd and didn't seem to care what other people thought about her. Esme did just what she wanted. Or so it seemed to Maggie.

She wore blue horn-rimmed glasses, a white shirt, a navy jacket, matching knee-length skirt and black Mary Janes with an elasticated band. She carried a neat black handbag, and a large wicker shopping bag that, more often than not, was empty. But then she had lots of weird hippie stuff too, like crystals and incense.

She looked at Maggie and smiled. 'You seem slightly glum, my dear.'

'I just spoke to my mum.'

'Ah, well. That would explain it.'

On the fourth finger of her right hand Esme always wore a beautiful ring that fascinated Maggie. She watched it sparkle there now. It was a snake eating its own tail, gold decorated with emeralds. It had a special name Maggie could never remember.

'What's your ring called again? An uru-buru?'

'*Ouroboros*.' Esme stubbed out her slim-line cigarette. 'Your dinner is in the fridge.'

'I'm not hungry.'

Esme consulted her tiny watch with the cobalt blue

strap. 'It's still early. But it's there when you want it. Derek and Phyllis are coming round later to play some music.'

She was a violinist, or had been. Maggie had heard her parents say, in that way people have when they are enjoying someone else's misfortune, that Esme had suffered a nervous breakdown and couldn't play professionally any more.

'You're very welcome to sit and listen, Maggie.'

Maggie made a face. 'I don't want to.'

Esme smiled again, amused. 'Well, there's a box of earplugs in the bathroom. I think it's Schubert tonight.'

Later, Maggie lay in the big pink plastic bath, a duvet wrapped around her, listening to the strains of a Schubert piano trio. The music didn't sound too bad when she'd finally got warm – Esme was a firm believer in not over-using the heating and the air in the bathroom was freezing.

Finally, at about ten-thirty, the music stopped and she heard the low murmur of voices. Maggie could only go to bed when they'd stopped gossiping. She might get to her sofa by midnight if she was lucky. Then again, the bath was pretty comfortable and she often fell asleep there until Esme came and woke her up.

It wasn't that Esme was unfriendly. In fact, she was very kind – the flat was small and she'd never even really met her before. It was more that Maggie was like another bit of furniture to her, another stack of old newspapers Esme

could work around. She didn't care where Maggie went or what she did. At first it was a brilliant change after her mum's endless worrying and nagging, but Maggie had realised it actually made you feel lonely.

Maggie reached down over the side of the bath and picked her laptop off the mat. She was the only person in the whole world who didn't have a mobile phone – aside from Esme, Derek and Phyllis, of course, but they didn't count. However, in an unprecedented attack of guilt for messing up her life, her dad had given her his old laptop because she needed it for school.

School. Maggie let out a sigh and closed her eyes. The voices next door still murmured on in their comforting lilt. She was very cosy now, the old duvet wrapped tightly around her, her head at a comfortable angle against the cushion. If she could just press pause and stay here for ever. But no, the earth would move round, the sun would come up and she'd have to go to Fortlake Secondary. Fortlake – it sounded like a prison to her.

There was a sharp tap at the window that made Maggie jump. She froze and listened, but there was only the faint sound of traffic rushing past the end of the drive and the voices still murmuring next door. She must have imagined it, or maybe it was just a branch tapping against the glass.

She settled back down, but the tapping came again, louder. Maggie clambered out of the bath, still wrapped in the duvet. But she couldn't see anything behind the small

frosted side window. She looked around for a weapon, but could only find a canister of Esme's super-strength hair-spray. It would have to do.

She edged over to the window clutching it. Three raps came again – *tap-tap-tap* – very precise.

Maggie whispered, 'Who's there?' but there was no reply. Impossibly curious now, she undid the latch and opened the window.

From the cold rainy darkness a brown lump catapulted itself inside, flying just past her ear. Maggie let out a tiny scream, or the start of a big one that she managed to suppress when she realised who it was.

The fat one-eyed cat was shivering with cold and wet. He shook himself out and started to curl around her legs, purring loudly, and amidst the heady thrumming of the rain she thought she could hear him humming a little tune: *bee bop bi doo da, de da da. . .*

Maggie smiled and closed the window. 'Come on then.'

She climbed back into the bath and the cat immediately jumped in after her. It took her a few minutes to get warm again, and get the pillow in just the right place, but she had to admit, the cat was a wonderful foot warmer once he'd dried off. His purrs rippled into her feet and she soon fell asleep.

It was long after one o'clock when Esme woke her. The cat had gone, but as Esme led her to her sofa bed, she was too dopey to wonder where he might be hiding.