**The House that Creaked**

Life was full of interest for Rosamunda - usually called Ros for short.

The friends, the sights, the smells, the never-ending games, and the snow, that wonderful frozen cotton wool, to bounce through. Life had been filled with one enjoyable adventure after another - until the last one!

It had not been an adventure of Ros's making. She had no say in the matter. When the family moved house she would naturally go with them; with the house-proud mother who could crochet anything from evening gowns to the woolly mammoth Ros played with, and the father (not so much fun) who was very important in the city and, unfortunately, all too aware of the fact. And, of course, they would be accompanied by their children; Peter, cropped hair like the bristles of a startled hedgehog and impish grin, and Amanda, well-behaved, considerate and always ready to stop Ros chasing pigeons. Despite this, Ros still liked her.

The new, huge house was intended to meet their father's aspirations, if no anyone else's. The rest of the family had been happy in their suburban semi only a 10 minute walk to school, two minutes to their grandmother and with a nearby tube station. It would have been the closest thing to living in the countryside if it hadn't been for the other houses blocking the view. When spring came the cherry trees lining the wide avenue blossomed and collared doves tried to nest in their apple tree (Ros's incessant barking always ensured they never succeeded). Everyone went to the park wearing summer clothes, only to dash the short distance back home to put on coats when they realised how cold it was, and the powder-puff seeds of early dandelions alighted on the nearby allotments. The beans, peas, tomatoes, artichokes and cauliflowers growing there would be sold from stalls at the gates later in the year to undercut the overpriced produce in the local supermarket.

Why would Ros's family want to move from this suburban idyll, two minutes from the park and boating lake, to a huge house in the middle of nowhere surrounded by farms owned by people with guns ready to eliminate sheep worrying dogs? As soon as the removal van arrived, Ros had the foreboding that this was going to be no fun at all. She was convinced that their new neighbours would shoot first before wondering whether the innocent, fluffy mongrel passing by their fields was someone's pet. Not that Ros had ever been fluffy, more a cross between a poodle and bottlebrush.

The drive out seemed to take forever.

Ros watched dolefully from the back of the hatchback with Peter and Amanda as suburbia disappeared. They entered a maze of country lanes which wound through a patchwork of fields filled with startling yellow and the intense green of immature wheat. Ros thought she glimpsed circling buzzards, probably over a sheep carcass, but tried not to think about it.

As they entered some rusty wrought iron gates all the misgivings the reluctant family had were confirmed. How could any corner of the idyllic English countryside be so foreboding?

The house at the end of the overgrown drive was Victorian Gothic, from front porch to forbidding rear courtyard. Its hall should have been filled with mediaeval armour and mounted heads of any creatures unfortunate enough to be found by the local farmers near a field of their sheep. Peter and Amanda were not impressed. Having left all their friends behind, they were hardly consoled by their father's offhand insistence that they could still keep in contact through Facebook. This from the man whose idea of socialising was working lunches with other bankers. He could not comprehend how fraught the online world could be for the discerning young mind. Peter preferred to play football outside anyway and not on some stupid games console, let alone chat to Mike, Tyrone and Ali - who would now be in the park kicking a ball around - on a social networking site. And where in this wilderness was he liable to find enough friends to make up a five-a-side team?

Amanda had closed her Facebook account when a troll started to leave offensive messages on the get well page she had set up for a schoolfriend being treated with cancer. Some flowers and a card had been far more appreciated anyway. Apart from that, their father had moved them to the middle of somewhere which didn't even have a decent broadband signal. This didn't matter to him because he was always in the City and used his smartphone. That could always get a connection. He had isolated his own family from the world they knew for the sake of raising his profile at the bank and golf club.

Mother was even unhappier than her children, though would never admit it. She hated driving after being in an accident which had injured a friend, yet was now faced with ferrying her children backwards and forwards 10 miles to the nearest school - assuming they could get into it.

But father was the breadwinner around whom the universe turned and the bleak Victorian monstrosity that should have had gargoyles, flying buttresses and a vampire's coffin in the cellar, would be home until the children were old enough to leave or their mother had a nervous breakdown.

Ros spent her first night under the huge table in the basement kitchen which was so intimidating it was unlikely that the new lady of the house would use it to make her delicate sugarcraft flowers. This is culinary dungeon, with its ancient cooking range and smoke encrusted tiles, couldn't have been used for years. In a stately home it might have been scrubbed up to become one of the exhibits demonstrating how people in the past lived. Here, it was a portal to the lower depths from which many cooks had probably run, screaming.

As she tried to sleep, Ros imagined the tentacles of gelatinous beasts lurking in the serving hatch of the dumb waiter, waiting to snatch prey. They would certainly explain why there were no rats. Or perhaps it was really the portal to a magical dimension where spring lambs frolicked, daffodils bloomed and cherry blossom filled the air with its pink confetti. No, not very likely given the odd odour in the old house that reeked of catastrophe.

As always, Mother had accepted the decision of her husband without question. She didn't let him know that she had Googled the property as soon she had the address. It seemed to have no history and, as the house had been purchased in a private sale from an associate of her husband's, there had been no estate agent to talk to. Had it been up to her she would have at least checked its provenance with Land Registry before entering into the deal, but better sense seldom touches those with the authority to ignore it. And there would have been no point in speaking up, even for the sakes of Peter and Amanda. Their father would have only accused her of being emotional again.

Days and weeks passed, the master of the house's silver sports car leaving early in the mornings and returning late in the evenings.

Mother did as much as she could to make some of the ten rooms homely, but the ceilings were so high the spiders must have been laughing at her futile attempts to dislodge their cobwebs. The nearest school was already overflowing and unable to accept Peter and Amanda, so they tried to help Mother with dusters, brooms and cups of tea until places could be found.

Ros was allowed out into the large grounds, yet felt no inclination to dash about without squirrels to chase. Instead she spent most of the time hiding under a laurel bush, hoping that whatever phantom stalked the place would not realise she was there. Back inside the house, she silently prowled the halls and landings, listening to the floorboards creak at what must have been the footfall of a heavy ghost. The sound was worst in the master bedroom and children's rooms next to it, as though a slumbering giant was fitfully turning in her sleep. Mother and the children had also noticed it and assumed that was what old houses were supposed to do. They had too many other things on their minds to worry about it. A school for Peter and Amanda had to be found before an inspector came round to prosecute Mother for failing to educate them. And then there was the problem of how to lay father's expensive Turkish carpet in his study without cutting it to shape, and finding a power point which didn't spark whenever an appliance requiring over 1000 watts was plugged into it.

Without squirrels, rats or pigeons to chase, only Ros had the time to worry about heavy-footed phantoms clumping about above them. It was hardly surprising that the wildlife kept well clear of the place.

Another week passed, and still no neighbour called to introduce themselves, not even a farmer with a gun demanding to know what sort of dog they owned or school inspector to find out why Peter and Amanda had disappeared off the educational map.

At last the huge dining room, despite its ludicrously high, creaking ceiling, was fit to live in and be used as a temporary classroom. In an early morning attempt to instil some education into her reluctant children, Mother told them to spread out their old school books on the ancient oak dining table. As it was impossible to get a decent Internet signal, she told them to bring the encyclopaedias and history books from the box they were still packed in. The sight of their familiar pages was oddly reassuring and Peter and Amanda began to show interest. Unfortunately Mother had no idea where to start. How much did her offspring already know about the history of the world, the life cycle of a butterfly, or Newton's law of gravity?

To confuse matters even more, there was a sudden bark from the doorway.

"Shut up Ros!" scolded Mother.

"We're trying to work," Peter joined in.

Her bark became more urgent.

"Ros!" they all shouted. "Shut up!"

At that, Ros frantically dashed about the room, running in circles until all three of them were obliged to get up and chase her out.

They had hardly entered the hall when there was an ear-splitting 'crack' from the room they had just left.

They all stopped and looked back in time to see a double bed crash through the dining room ceiling.

Mother, Peter and Amanda were rooted to the spot, unable to take in what was happening.

Ros bolted to the front door, yowling as loudly as she could.

This prompted Mother to scream, "Outside!" She dragged her bewildered children into the front courtyard as a hail of plaster and ceiling lathes continued to fall through the ceiling after the double bed.

They ran for the cover of the bushes on its far side. From there Mother, children and Ros watched the Victorian mansion cave in. The ornate chimney stacks crashed through the roof bringing everything below them down in an avalanche of tiles, timber, bricks and furniture. The children's beds hung suspended precariously on fractured floorboards before the wall they were attached to crumbled.

Then Mother remembered - she had a cake baking in the gas oven! The ancient gas main must have been fractured. Hardly had the thought crossed her mind when there was a huge 'boom!' from the kitchen and the remaining walls of the house were blown apart.

When debris stopped raining about the family, the rubble that had briefly been their home burst into flames.

Given how remote the house was, it was unlikely that the explosion had been heard by anyone else or flames spotted by a light aircraft. To make matters worse, no one had thought to snatch up a mobile phone.

Mother, Peter and Amanda were obliged to trudge three miles, numb with shock, and in their dressing gowns and slippers, along the winding lanes until they came to a cottage. The remote neighbour seldom had visitors, especially ones in dressing gowns, and was puzzled by their arrival.

Mother was still speechless at seeing her house collapse.

Ros barked, hoping he wasn't one of the dog shooting fraternity, and this prompted Amanda to blurt out what had happened.

"Oh my goodness!" exclaimed the old man. "What possessed you to move in there? That house was condemned years ago!"

After the emergency services and gas engineers had been informed, the elderly neighbour contacted the local Women's Institute who supplied clothes, meals and dog food. Then, when the family had sufficiently recovered, they arranged transport to take them to the house of Peter and Amanda's grandmother.

Near death experiences can trigger remarkable changes in a person's character, and Mother was no exception. She sent a text message to her husband, telling him in no uncertain terms that she had no intention of putting up with any more of his decisions; which were now very limited because his house hadn't been insured. This was compounded by his bank collapsing shortly after their separation.

At least Peter and Amanda were now able to live with their grandmother, and when they were back at school Ros could return to chasing squirrels.