

SIMON RAE



# MEDUSA'S BUTTERFLY

Where there is blame, there must be punishment . . .

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## About the Book

*A box is left on Marcus's doorstep in the rain. Fussy Aunt Hester has told Marcus not to open the front door under any circumstances. But she's out – and just this once can't hurt . . . can it?*

Except the parcel isn't embroidery supplies for Aunt Hester. Or fishing tackle for Uncle Frank. Whatever is in there, it's alive. And it's ANGRY.

Marcus must find out why it's been delivered to him before the terrible, beautiful Medusa turns everyone he holds dear to stone . . . and then comes for him.

Also by Simon Rae  
*Keras*

# MEDUSA'S BUTTERFLY

SIMON RAE

RHCP DIGITAL

*For Susan Hitch,  
First Reader*

# CHAPTER 1

'I SHAN'T BE long, Marcus.'

Aunt Hester stepped out of her 'indoor' shoes and stamped her feet into her fur-lined boots. Then she scooped up her shopping bag with her handbag inside it, and grabbed an umbrella from the umbrella stand. After that she glowered down the hall at Marcus as he watched from the kitchen doorway.

'Why that man can't do a simple bit of shopping . . .' she said, shaking her head and frowning. Aunt Hester's frown seemed permanently carved on her forehead. It meant she could look disapproving even when she hadn't actually got anything to disapprove of. But in this case she had. The previous evening Uncle Frank had forgotten some of the things he'd been told to pick up on his way home from work.

'Shall I come and help carry the bags?' Marcus asked, less through wanting to be helpful than from a feeling that he'd been cooped up in the house too long.

'You stay here,' Aunt Hester replied. 'I'm not risking that cold getting any worse and having you off school again next week. There's a shower on the way. You could catch your death.' She twisted round and squinted through the frosted glass of the front door. Then, as she reached for the doorknob, she added: 'Don't open the door - not to anyone. Do you hear me?'

Marcus heard her perfectly. Making herself heard was not one of Aunt Hester's problems. Her frown deepened as she looked about to see if she could find anything to be cross about before she left. 'Tuck your shirt in,' was the

best she could come up with. Then she turned on her heel and let herself out of the front door, slamming it behind her.

Marcus saw her shadow in the frosted glass for a moment and waited for the creak and slam of the garden gate. Only when he heard the metallic squeal of its hinges and the clunk of its latch did he allow himself to savour the peace that fell whenever his aunt left the house.

Aunt Hester was a small woman, but she made a lot of noise. She was always clattering pans in the kitchen, bumping the Hoover along the skirting board and banging ornaments back down after she dusted them. And that was when she wasn't shouting at Uncle Frank. It wasn't a big house, but when she thought of the next thing to tell Uncle Frank to do – or to tell him off for not doing – Aunt Hester always seemed to be at the other end of it.

'Have you brought the coal in?' she'd shout from the landing, a minute after she'd been in the sitting room, getting Marcus to lift his feet up while she ran the Hoover along the front of the sofa.

'The bulb in the downstairs hall's gone!' – this when Uncle Frank had just gone up the stairs on some other errand.

'I thought you were going to take the rubbish to the recycling depot?'

There was a lot of stuff to take to the recycling depot, now that Uncle Frank had been given the job of putting in French windows and building a patio out from the dining room – though when Aunt Hester ever thought she was going to sit there on a summer's afternoon, Marcus couldn't imagine. As far as he could see, she only wanted the patio because Mrs Hodgson three doors down had one. But it meant she now had even more things to nag Uncle Frank about. Not that she was ever short of ammunition.

'I spend my entire time tidying up after the two of you. I really don't know why I bother. I should just pack a bag and



go and stay with Megan in Rhyl and leave you to get on with it. Then we'd see.'

This threat to decamp to her sister's on the North Wales coast was always delivered as though it were her trump card. But it never happened. Marcus suspected that Aunt Megan would prove more of a match for her sister than Uncle Frank, and that Aunt Hester's habit of nagging him was too ingrained for her to give it up. So on and on it went, day in, day out. It was the backdrop to Marcus's life, and although it pained him, he was used to it.

'All I ask is a little support, a helping hand here and there. But it's too much to ask, I suppose. You'd both rather be down at the canal with your wretched fishing rods.'

She was right about that.

It was quiet along the canal. Apart from the odd gruff greeting from other anglers, no one said anything to you at all. You just sat watching your float, letting your mind drift away, free from its moorings. Marcus sometimes looked into his uncle's face and wondered what he was thinking. Perhaps he wasn't thinking at all – just enjoying not being within earshot of Aunt Hester.

*How boring*, people at school said, *sitting on the canal bank all Saturday afternoon*. But it wasn't. It might yield its rewards and satisfactions more slowly than other activities, but once you got into it, fishing was very absorbing. And after long hours when nothing seemed to happen, you would get a bite, see your float jerked beneath the surface and know that in the swirl of the water, you had a fish on your line.

It was possible, Marcus thought, that Uncle Frank was only truly happy when he was playing a fish; letting it tire itself out before gradually coaxing it in to the bank, lifting it out of the water on the end of the line and releasing it from the hook into the keep-net. You didn't get big fish in the canal – you'd have had to go to a carp lake for the monsters shown off proudly in the pages of *Angling Monthly* – but

even a little roach could give you a run for your money. It was exciting, but also a little frightening. The intensity of the fish's struggle as it thrashed around in panic was something you shared with it before you dropped it into the net. Of course, you knew it would be released at the end of the session, but the fish didn't. To the fish it was a life-or-death battle.

Letting the fish free was another of the things that riled Aunt Hester.

'You waste all that time - and you don't even put any food on the table.'

But Uncle Frank only smiled, and winked at Marcus. Fishing was their thing, the thing that bonded them - something Marcus might have done with his father, were he around.

Marcus wandered into the kitchen and picked up the latest copy of *Angling Monthly*. It was the only luxury Uncle Frank was allowed, over and above his actual fishing tackle - another bone of contention with Aunt Hester. ('How can a simple fishing rod cost over a *hundred* pounds?') Flicking through the pages, Marcus saw advertisements for rods that were much more expensive than Uncle Frank's. But he was mainly interested in the photos of champion anglers, posing with their enormous catches draped over their arms: *Ed Swillins with his 240lb catch* read the caption underneath one of a smiling man thrusting a huge fish towards the camera.

'Why don't you go in for a competition?' Marcus had asked Uncle Frank once. He'd given a short little laugh and raised his eyebrows at the question. They both knew the answer: Aunt Hester. But Marcus was sure his uncle could catch really big fish. He could compete with Ed Swillins any day.

He imagined sitting on the bank of the carp lake next to Uncle Frank, saying nothing, hardly moving, but willing a monster to take the bait. And then the triumph of the

weigh-in, and the presentation of the trophy, with lots of cameras clacking away, and there Uncle Frank would be, modestly holding up his giant catch in the next issue of the magazine. It was a lovely dream. But that's all it was, a dream.

Marcus smiled sadly, and was just wondering about making himself some orange squash when the doorbell rang. *Perhaps Aunt Hester has forgotten her key*, he thought. No; if that had happened, she'd be banging on the door and calling crossly through the letter box. Although she'd told him not to answer the door, he thought he'd better go and see who it was.

A silhouette was visible through the frosted glass. Marcus heard something being dropped on the doorstep, before the shadowy figure disappeared. Marcus could only assume the something was a parcel. He hesitated. Surely bringing in a parcel would be all right? It had started to drizzle again: he could hear the rain and it was getting harder. Aunt Hester would be furious with him if he left the parcel out on the step getting soaked. He'd be in the wrong whatever he did.

A gust of wind blew the rain against the door's glass panels. Marcus opened the door decisively, and looked down at the nondescript cardboard box at his feet. He was about to pick it up when he noticed that the delivery man had failed to shut the garden gate, which was another thing that made Aunt Hester furious. Marcus ran down the path in the heavy rain to close it. He dashed back, scooping up the parcel on his way into the house.

It was a very ordinary box: brown, square, sealed with tape. About the right size to contain a football – though he knew it wouldn't be a football: he never got anything in the post. He wondered if it was a bit of fishing tackle Uncle Frank had ordered, or a tool for his building work. Most likely it would be for Aunt Hester – a new cooking pot or something. It was certainly too heavy to be a fresh consignment of wool for her embroidery.

Marcus was weighing up the uninteresting possibilities when he found his eye drawn to the label. And there, to his astonishment, he saw his own name: *M. Waldrist, Esq.* It was slightly unsettling – as was something about the writing. Though blurred by the rain, there was a distinctive character to it, something which looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn't think where he'd seen it before. As he studied it, something very odd happened.

Something inside the box began to move.

Marcus was so startled he nearly dropped it, and ended up doing a clumsy juggling act to prevent it falling on the hall carpet. What on earth was inside?

Perhaps he'd been mistaken?

But there it was again – a slight tremor, as if whatever it was inside the box was settling itself after being shaken about. At the same time he heard a noise, though that seemed to be more in his head than coming from the box. It was an unnerving sound – like a wind from afar; a sound that conjured up lonely, rocky places, where no green things grew. And caught on that wind was another noise, one that sounded eerily like speech coming to him across a huge distance. Like the light of a long-dead star, Marcus thought. He felt a chill run through his entire body and started to shake. Whatever was in the box was having an extraordinary effect on him.

He shoved the front door shut with his foot and stood – holding the box as though it contained an explosive device – desperately wondering what to do next.

There was more movement, and now a noise that definitely came from inside the box. He couldn't spend all day standing with it in the hall, but somehow Marcus didn't want it in the kitchen. That was the homeliest room in the house. This thing didn't belong there, whatever it was. He would put it in the dining room, he decided. Marcus loathed the dining room, the scene of so many stiff Sunday lunches during which he stared blankly at himself in the

large mirror that ran along the wall opposite the door, trying not to notice how slowly the hands on the mantelpiece clock were moving. Beside the clock stood a framed photograph of his parents; a reminder of the difference between the life he had now and the life he would have had if they hadn't both died when he was young. The photo never failed to depress him, and he looked away from it as he put down the box on the dining-room table. Everything in the room had been pushed to one side to allow for Uncle Frank's work, and the table covered with a dust sheet.

Marcus stood back and contemplated the box. He wondered again what was inside – and who could have sent it to him. There was only one way to find out, and so he walked over to Uncle Frank's work bench and fetched a Stanley knife. Just before he slit the tape, Marcus paused. You weren't allowed to send animals through the post, were you? But whatever was in the box was definitely alive. Aunt Hester hated animals, and had vetoed every request for a pet. Pets were dirty, demanding and expensive, she said. Aunt Hester also pointed out that she 'already had two high-maintenance creatures to look after in the house as it was'. Why would she want to make life even worse, with cat hairs on the sofa, or scratch marks on the skirting boards, let alone mess on the kitchen floor? *Mess*. Possibly the thing Aunt Hester hated most in the world.

Marcus looked up and froze. Damp footprints led back from where he stood – no doubt they went along the hall to the front door too. Perhaps he just wanted an excuse to put off opening the box, but Marcus set down the Stanley knife on the table. It could wait. Mess on the carpet could not. If she came back before he'd cleared it up, Aunt Hester would do her imitation of a nuclear power station approaching meltdown. Preventing that became his number-one priority.

Marcus darted into the hall, desperately thinking ahead – cloths from the kitchen? The mop from the utility room at

the end of the hall? But it was too late. There was her unmistakable silhouette at the front door, the familiar impatient scrabbling of her key at the lock. And then the door swung open.

As he knew she would, Aunt Hester saw the footprints straight away, and her eyes swept down the hall to fix him in their glare. 'What on earth . . .?' she started, swinging the door shut and then kicking off her boots to avoid adding her own wet footprints to his.

*Here we go*, Marcus thought. And he was not wrong. 'Didn't I tell you not to go out, not to open the door? I leave you alone for twenty minutes' – here she slammed her dripping umbrella into the stand by the door and dumped her shopping bag to free her arms for waving and pointing – 'and what do I find? You've disobeyed me. And made a mess of my house. Footprints all the way down my hall!' She took a pace forward, following the trail. She stopped by the dining-room door: 'Just what do you think you're up to?'

Marcus remained rooted to the spot.

'There was a parcel,' he managed to croak. 'They left the front gate open—'

'So you decided to walk down and shut it and then come back and stamp dirt all over my hall carpet did you? Very thoughtful.'

Aunt Hester was working herself up into the worst mood possible.

'So where is it, this precious parcel?' she demanded.

'I put it in the dining room.'

'Well don't just stand there,' barked his aunt, seeing the box, and obviously intending to go into the dining room to open it. 'You may have a cold but that shouldn't make you stupid. Go and get a bucket and mop. Now!'

Marcus had been going to warn her there might be something alive in the box, but Aunt Hester looked at him so fiercely that he shut his mouth and turned towards the utility room.

He was manoeuvring the bucket and mop from behind the ironing board when he heard Aunt Hester's scream. He nearly dropped the mop. She must have opened the parcel and found – what? He braced himself for further explosions, but there was nothing. Not a sound. Silence.

Marcus put the mop down and made his way back down the hall towards the dining room. The door was ajar still, but no sounds came from within. Not only was Aunt Hester not raging at him – he couldn't even hear her breathing.

'Aunt Hester?' Marcus said, very quietly.

There was no reply.

He pushed the door. It moved a few centimetres then stopped, bumping up against something solid. There had been nothing there only a couple of minutes ago.

'Aunt Hester?' he tried again, this time with a note of panic.

She'd had a heart attack. She was lying on the floor, dead. That was what was stopping the door from opening. He was about to squeeze through the narrow gap to check, when he *did* hear something.

At first he didn't recognize the noise. It sounded a bit like the hiss of the gas fire in the front room. But the fire made a regular, comforting sound. This wasn't comforting at all. It was chilling, dangerous, menacing. Some instinct Marcus couldn't explain made him drop to his knees. Very cautiously he reached a hand round the dining-room door.

His fingers made contact with something, something hard. Very hard.

It was like a base or plinth for – his hand groped – some sort of column. As far as he could make out, the column rose smoothly until it came to a bump, and then only just above the bump there was what felt like an upside-down ledge.

Marcus started trembling. He moved his arm further round the door. His fumbling hand found another column, a few centimetres apart from the first. He let his hand rest on

it for a moment. The hissing in the background seemed to intensify.

Marcus withdrew his arm and held it to his chest, welcoming it back to safety.

His teeth began to chatter and his chest squeezed uncontrollably, as though he'd just completed a cross-country run and then been thrown into an icy-cold swimming pool.

He had often felt fear, real fear – when the Gang had taken a dislike to him in Year Seven, for example. And, of course, he still had the occasional nightmare about the car accident which had cost his mother her life. But he had never experienced terror like this.

Marcus sat on the hall carpet, his back to the doorjamb, incapable of moving.

For a moment he tried to persuade himself that this was all just his cold; a hallucination conjured up by the medicine Aunt Hester had been forcing him to take. In a few minutes she would come back from the shop, tell him off for sitting on the floor and send him upstairs to bed.

But he looked up the hall and saw the fur-lined boots, the bulging shopping bag dumped by the front door and the umbrella still dripping in the stand. Aunt Hester had already come in, had already lost her temper with him, and had flung herself in a fury into the dining room where . . .

If only he'd called out to warn her. But warn her of what? And would she have listened? Of course not. She never did, especially when she was cross.

But what had happened to her? Marcus looked at the gap left by the door. All he had to do was to push his head in and he'd find out. But something stopped him. The silence from inside the dining room was deeply sinister. There was no heavy breathing or groaning as might have been expected had Aunt Hester had a stroke or a heart attack. The silence spoke only of death.



Something was working its way to the forefront of Marcus's mind; something he remembered from school a long time ago. Something that made the ends of his fingers tingle, and his breathing slow until he almost forgot to breathe at all. But even as the memory came into focus, he tried to reject it. It just wasn't possible. Here he was in the twenty-first century. The thing that had forced its way into his mind couldn't exist in a world of light bulbs and power tools and central heating . . .

He pushed the thought aside. Marcus decided: he had to look round the door. The thought of doing it made him feel sick. But he would have to face the terrible thing waiting for him inside the dining room sooner or later; he couldn't just sit there until Uncle Frank came home.

Reluctantly he got back onto his knees, craned his neck round the door and peered in.

The first thing he saw was his own face in the wall mirror. He looked like a cartoon depicting someone frightened out of their wits. He was just about to swivel his head round when he froze. The silence was suddenly broken by that hissing noise again – obviously triggered by his appearance.

It was a horrible noise – a spiteful, hateful noise. And it brought back the thought which he had dismissed only a few moments before.

Gradually, painfully, Marcus let his eyeballs swivel to the left, to see what else the wall mirror could show him.

It was as he had suspected but refused to believe. And far more horrifying than he could possibly have imagined.

Aunt Hester had made a thorough job of opening the box. She had picked up the Stanley knife and slashed the brown tape before pulling the sides of the box open.

And that had been the last thing she would ever do.

Marcus stared helplessly into the mirror. Spilling out of the box he could see a sort of writhing mass, like seaweed

in the tide. Only the colours were wrong, and it wasn't seaweed.

It was a nest of snakes.

He wasn't sure how many there were – too many to count at a glance, anyway. They weren't looking at him – at least, they weren't looking at him in the mirror. They were looking at the real him in the doorway; they were straining and spitting, their little forked tongues slithering in and out in anticipation. As they moved towards him, the hissing increased in volume. But, terrifying though the snakes were, they weren't the worst of it. It was what they were rooted to that transfixed him.

What he saw, resting in the ruins of the cardboard box, was a human head – the head of a woman. And the snakes formed her hair. The face had faint traces of something beautiful, but now it was a blotched and ghostly green, palely luminescent, as though exhumed from a grave.

Although the face was dead, there was life in it. The lips were as colourless as worms, curving horribly in what might have been a smile, but looked more like a sneer. And the eyes – the eyes were a terror. When they caught his gaze in the mirror, Marcus felt their intense pull, their magnetic attraction. They were like whirlpools mesmerizing him, luring him into their shadowy depths. For, although the leaden pupils were terrifyingly dark, there was an understanding in them, a penetrating recognition of the gnawing at the centre of Marcus's life: the loss of both his parents. The loss that had condemned him to his dull, unsatisfactory life in a dull, unsatisfactory town. The eyes understood his sadness. And all he had to do was turn his head and meet that gaze full on, rather than in the mirror, and his troubles would be over.

Confirmation of that was right there, standing behind the door: with her arms raised in shock and disbelief, there was Aunt Hester, unmoving, blasted into stone – a perfect statue of herself.

Marcus jerked his head back. He put his hands to his mouth, willing himself not to gag. His distant memory of the lesson in primary school had been right. On the other side of the dining-room door was the most lethal of all the monsters in Greek mythology. Medusa.

## CHAPTER 2

THEY HAD DONE a project on Greek myths in Year 6. They had read the stories, painted pictures and put on short plays about the heroes who had fought against overwhelming odds to achieve impossible deeds. And the one which Marcus recalled most vividly was the story of Medusa and the appalling fate that the gods meted out to her.

Somehow – inexplicably, impossibly, but undeniably – the product of that terrible curse was now resting on the dining-room table of 21 Brunel Street. How had that happened? Who had sent it? Where had it come from? These were all important questions, but the overriding one was: what was he going to do about it? Of course, he could pick up the phone and dial 999. But how would the conversation go from there? *Which service do you want?* The one that deals with people whose aunts are turned into stone by nightmares from ancient mythology, please . . .?

Marcus shook his head. He had to deal with this by himself. He just had to work out how.

Marcus sat back on the hall carpet, thinking. After a while, his eye caught the bags Aunt Hester had dropped by the front door. They'd need moving. He might as well start with the easy stuff.

He put the shopping bag in the kitchen, and decided to take her handbag up to his room. There, feeling like a thief, he opened it. Inside were the usual items – a purse, lipstick, a packet of tissues – and the thing he was looking for: Aunt Hester's phone. It had taken Uncle Frank a lot of persuading to get Aunt Hester to agree to having one –

partly, Marcus suspected, because she thought Marcus would then also want one, and she certainly wasn't having that. Anyway, she allowed Uncle Frank to get her the phone, though she never used it. Just to be on the safe side, Marcus turned it off before stuffing it back in the bag, which he then shoved under his bed. Now to the main problem: what to do with Medusa's head, sitting in its box in the dining room? He went downstairs again, along the hall and through the utility room into the garden.

Uncle Frank's building works were shrouded in tarpaulin, but Marcus removed the couple of breeze blocks acting as weights, and quickly exposed the hole in the dining-room wall. He could see the back of the box on the table. The noise he'd made had alerted the snakes, which were now turned in his direction, looking like a window box of angry yellow tulips. And behind them loomed Aunt Hester, posed in the split second of her death. Because surely that's what she was now. Dead.

Flinching from that awful warning, and weak with horror, Marcus tried to concentrate on how he was going to cover the box and its terrifying contents. A dust sheet might do, but then he imagined the snakes' fangs sticking through like thorns. No; he needed something thicker – a duvet? That was more like it.

He went back into the house to get one. As he approached the dining-room door, Marcus found he was tiptoeing. He also found a sudden, irrational desire to put his head round the door and take another look. That distant wind began to blow in his head again. It was insistent, like the banging of a door. And there was a rhythm to it: *thump* – *thump* – like the two syllables of a word. He strained to make it out. *Thump* – *thump*. Was the word his name? *Mar* – *cus* . . . *Mar* – *cus*? He gripped the bottom of the banisters fiercely and forced himself to run up the stairs to the spare room.

Marcus seized the duvet from his bed and ran out through the house with it. He stood outside the door for a moment. He had to get everything right – or be turned into stone, like Aunt Hester. With a deep breath, he pushed back through the hole in the dining-room wall.

He glanced again at Aunt Hester. She looked, he couldn't help thinking, a bit like Mr Bishop conducting orchestra practice on a Saturday morning, with arms flung up and an intense expression on her face.

The snakes were restless, darting to and fro like the flames of a hungry fire.

Marcus let half the duvet drape down. The snakes stopped their writhing as though trying to fathom his intentions.

He advanced slowly. He was frightened, but he was also focused, concentrating the way he did when reeling in a fish – though obviously the stakes here were far, far higher.

Another step, and the snakes started swaying and hissing again.

Another step. They were watching his every move. They stretched their jaws wide, baring their needle-like fangs, and flicking out their forked tongues.

He paused. It was not too late to turn back, to run away and call for help. But then he glanced again at Aunt Hester. How would he explain that? How would he admit that he'd let her open the box? Of course, he couldn't have known it contained the Gorgon's head – how could he? The guilt, he told himself, was only because of what had happened. No one could accuse him of wanting it to happen. Could they?

As he approached the table, he let the rest of the duvet unravel. With every step, the hissing grew louder and the heads strained in fury. Now he was within a metre of the table. One more step, that's all it would take. But his closeness stirred up an even greater frenzy of snake rage which stopped him in his tracks. So much hatred, so much pent-up malice, was intimidating. *They can't hurt you,*

Marcus told himself. *Not if you get the duvet over them.* He lifted it above his head. *Throw it – throw it NOW!*

In a blind panic he jerked the duvet over the box. A trailing corner snagged on the table, but the snakes were covered.

Marcus let out a sigh of relief, then he looked again at Aunt Hester.

What was he expecting? Approval? No chance of that. There would be no response from the familiar figure frozen motionless before him.

Giving the table a wide berth, and ignoring the frantic undulations of the duvet, Marcus went up to his aunt. As he did so, he stepped on something hard. It was Uncle Frank's Stanley knife which she had obviously dropped in the last nanosecond of her earthly existence. Marcus picked it up and placed it on the duvet.

Then he turned to his aunt once more, and put his face close to hers. It was incredible – a face he'd known all his life, petrified into the most accurate sculpture. How could it happen? What unearthly power could do that? He stared into the eyes he had never dared to meet when she was alive. Her eyeballs bulged but were quite lifeless, impenetrable, the lids above them incapable of ever blinking again. Her nostrils flared, as they so often did in life, but now they were distended in terror, not anger. The mouth remained open, blasted into a surprised 'O'; her last cry frozen into silence between stone lips. And the frown line that crossed her forehead was as deep in death as it had been in life. Marcus reached up his hand and ran his fingernail along it. It was extraordinary: every molecule in her once-living body, every thread of her coat and the cardigan beneath it, every pleat of her no-nonsense skirt, her woollen stockings and her slip-on 'indoor' shoes; every last atom of the entity known as Aunt Hester was now converted to stone.

*It's my fault*, he thought. He knew he could have tried to warn her, whether it would have made any difference or not. At least he would have tried. But instead he'd backed off down the hall to get the mop. And now she was dead, transformed into a stocky stalagmite in the deathly cave of the dining room. He knew he was going to feel guilty about it for a very long time.

The words 'I'm sorry' formed in his mind. But he never uttered them, because just then the phone started ringing.

An intrusion from the outside world was the last thing Marcus wanted or expected, and it caught him off guard. But the phone was nothing compared to the ring at the door, followed by a few urgent thumps on the glass pane.

He stood there, caught between his urge to answer the phone - which was the other side of the dining-room table - and the need to find out who it was at the front door and send them away as fast as possible.

Assuming it was Uncle Frank on the phone, he would ring back later, though he'd have to think of a good reason why Aunt Hester hadn't picked up. In the meantime, he couldn't leave whoever it was waiting on the doorstep. He squeezed out of the dining room, shutting the door firmly behind him.

The silhouette in the door pane was quite short, and he'd guessed it was Hannah before she'd called through the letterbox:

'Mrs Armstrong - is Marcus in?'

How had it got so late? Marcus wondered. It was the end of the school day.

There was another thump at the door.

'Please, Mrs Armstrong.'

There was a note of panic in her voice, and Marcus rushed down the hall to let her in.

'Oh, Marcus, thank goodness,' Hannah said, pushing past him and leaning hard against the door. 'You saved my life.'

Marcus felt the same. It was so good to see her.



He could see the relief on her face. There was probably relief on his too.

‘Didn’t you want to answer that?’ Hannah said.

Marcus shook his head. ‘My aunt doesn’t like me answering the phone.’

They stood awkwardly in the hall. The phone stopped ringing.

‘Where is she?’

*Not out doing the shopping*, Marcus thought, remembering the shopping bag left prominently on the work surface in the kitchen.

‘Oh, she just popped out to see a neighbour. Church flowers or something.’

He could see Hannah’s interest fade.

‘Are you all right?’

Hannah nodded. ‘I am now.’

‘What happened?’

‘They were waiting for me at the park gate, but I saw them in time.’

Marcus knew who ‘they’ were, and nodded sympathetically. The Gang tended to leave him alone these days – he’d grown a lot since Year Seven – but they still ruined life for a lot of people at school. They were led by a vicious boy called Arran. Arran wasn’t much to look at, but you didn’t want to cross him. His eyes burned with a psychotic fury if he was crossed, and if he didn’t deal with you himself, he’d hand over the job to his side-kick, Digger. Digger was huge, a great lumbering oaf with a boxer’s hands. Together they led a reign of terror, which the Head and the teaching staff seemed unable to halt. And it wasn’t just Arran and Digger. There was a group of girls who took particular delight in persecuting anyone different, anyone vulnerable. And with her unhappy home life, Hannah was one of their favourite targets.

‘Do you want to tell me about it?’