

RUBY SPRINGTIME

It was early springtime and the ladders were already out, leaning against the wall.

‘What are you going to do with those, Grannie?’ Roddy asked.

‘Well, first, I will gather honey from the rooftop hive so that we can have a tasty afternoon tea. And then, once Daddy has collected you, I shall have to perform some special duties which were bestowed on me long ago.’

Roddy went into the house and settled down on the sumptuous sofa. It was scattered with plump cushions in various shades of vermilion – everything from berry red to soft pink, and even a light russet that matched Grannie’s auburn hair. He loved the sofa. It was warm and cuddly like Grannie. On the table next to it sat a white box. Roddy had never seen it before. It looked plain and uninteresting but . . . it was a box, and his small-boy curiosity got the better of him. He opened it. Inside, it was filled to the brim with tiny red stones. They sparkled in the light with flashes of bright crimson. Bedazzled, he stared at the beautiful stones for a few minutes before carefully shutting the lid. He thought maybe he had found one of Grannie’s secrets.

Grannie, meanwhile, was busy in the kitchen. She had added a pot of honey to her tray of delights and was tending to the kettle as it whistled loudly like a speeding train. Afternoon tea at Grannie’s – what better way to spend a sunny but cold spring day. Earl Grey for Grannie, warm milk for Roddy. And treats! Pancakes with honey, scones and strawberry jam, raspberry macarons and – Roddy’s favourite – red velvet cake. It was the best cake he had ever tasted in his whole five years.

‘Tell me a story, please . . . one of your poems,’ he asked, snuggling in for a hug from Grannie’s bottomless bag of hugs. Grannie contemplated the pinkening sky. She would have to be careful of the time. With a kiss to Roddy’s forehead, she began . . .

‘On clear spring nights long, long ago
a Night Shepherd gathered her seeds to sow –
small glittering rubies to fill the sky
where sun and moon and shooting stars fly

Ruby-fuelled magic infused the world
where scarlet tulips in spring were unfurled,
and red skies at dusk which glittered and spread
such joy for the morrow when going to bed

And then in the summer, sweet juicy berries,
strawberries, raspberries, rose hips, cherries . . .
Rouge autumn leaves, and Rudolf’s nose,
Robin’s red breast and Santa’s clothes

The gift of the jewels for all below?
To cherish Earth's colours, keep magic aglow
through all the seasons, the rain and the snow,
till again in the spring, more rubies to sow.'

'Why was she called a Night Shepherd, Grannie?' asked Roddy. 'Did she have lambs to look after?'

As she sipped her tea, the glinting stars in Grannie's ruby bracelet tinkled against her eau de Nil teacup.

'Well,' she said, 'There are seven Night Shepherds. From ancient times they have been guardians: protectors of the sky. They are the shepherds of all the world's colours. They look after them . . . yes, a bit like lambs . . . ensuring every year that they grow strong and bright. Like farmers in their fields, spring is a busy time for them. Seeds must be sown so that the magic of the world will never fade. If, for example, the ruby Night Shepherd does not sow her jewels in the starry sky during the shortening evenings of spring, there will be no golden-red dusks, no springtime red tulips, no crimson fruits in the summer, no carmine leaves in the fall. Robin Redbreast will just be Robin Brown and there will be no warmth in the sun to give children rosy cheeks.'

Outside, the pink of the sky was now streaked with pale violet. Roddy gazed out the window, transfixed.

'And Santa Claus won't have red trousers,' he sighed.

'Indeed,' said Grannie, 'And let me tell you a secret . . . Rudolf the Reindeer's red nose is really a ruby! The brightest, most magical ruby there ever was. The ruby Night Shepherd, one early spring long ago, planted it as a seed in the sky near the North Star. It grew large and dazzling bright. The strawberries that year were extra plump! But, on Christmas Eve, dark clouds covered the stars and Santa got lost not long after leaving the North Pole. Then, to his great delight, Rudolf saw the beautiful ruby glowing high in the sky. He led the other reindeer towards it, nudged it with his nose and . . . like magic, the ruby stuck fast. You can imagine Rudolf's surprise. He had a brand-new nose, radiant and red! Its luminous light shone through the clouds, showing him the way. Ever since, Rudolf has been Santa's most important reindeer, leading his friends safely through the skies every Christmas.'

'Wow,' said Roddy, sitting as still as Mr Pricklepants the Gnome who stood guard over the goldfish in Grannie's garden pond.

'So, you see, Roddy,' continued Grannie, 'All the work the Night Shepherds do in the springtime brings great, sometimes unexpected, rewards all year round.'

By now, cerise light was sweeping in through the window, making Grannie glow like an angel. Her eyes twinkled and her fingers began to fidget.

'It's nearly time, Roddy,' she whispered.

'Time for what, Grannie?' Roddy whispered back.

Grannie winked.

The remaining Earl Grey was cooling in the pot; Roddy had finished his milk and had wiped the last blob of frosting from his plate. Grannie filled a little box with cake and honey treats for him to take home and gave him the biggest, gentlest hug. She smelled of spring flowers fresh from the garden.

'I love your house, Grannie,' said Roddy. 'And I love *you*. Are you going up your ladders now? Can I come with you?'

'I'm afraid not, Roddy dear. But who knows . . . perhaps one day. Meantime, here are some poppy seeds to plant in your garden. Remember that spring is the time when magic begins, when hopes and wishes are embedded in the earth, in the air and in your heart. Like all things, they cannot grow unless first they are sown, then cherished and cared for with kindness and love.'

'Is that what your special duties are, Grannie? Are you planting magic poppies somewhere?'

'Something like that!' said Grannie, smiling. 'My six friends and I have much work to do.'

A car horn sounded on the road outside. The sky was now crimson.

'Daddy's here to collect you,' Grannie said.

She squeezed Roddy tightly.

'Just always remember this, Roddy,' she said, stroking his strawberry-blond hair, 'A rainbow is a love letter from the Night Shepherds. It means that they have been busy in the skies. So, when you see one, make a special wish, and be glad that all the world is full of beautiful colours.'

She took him into the hall and helped him put his coat on before walking with him down the yellow brick path to the car. His Daddy was leaning inside fiddling with the seatbelt which had become twisted around Roddy's booster seat.

'Have you been playing with this again, Roddy?' he tutted.

Grannie smiled and winked. Roddy giggled and blew her a kiss as she hurried off.

'Did you have a nice visit?' his Daddy asked.

'Yes, thank you. Grannie smells of flowers and she has lots of red stones.'

By the time Roddy was safely strapped into his seat Grannie was already halfway up her ladders. Roddy watched; eyes as big as one of Grannie's tea plates. She had her bee net over her shoulder and inside it he could see the white box from the table. She climbed higher and higher, gazing upwards, until suddenly she disappeared like a soft wisp of cloud in the darkening sky.

'Wow!' he gasped again, 'Grannie's magic!'

'What are you saying, son?' his Daddy asked.

Roddy smiled.

'I like magic, Daddy. And rainbows.'

He clutched his packet of poppy seeds, excited to plant his wishes, to help Grannie keep robins red-breasted and Santa in red trousers. Spring was indeed going to be a busy time. There was much to do.