

CHAPTER 8

The other mother looked healthier than before: there was a little blush to her cheeks, and her hair was wriggling like lazy snakes on a warm day. Her black-button eyes seemed as if they had been freshly polished.

She had pushed through the mirror as if she were walking through nothing more solid than water and had stared down at Coraline. Then she had opened the door with the little silver key. She picked Coraline up, just as Coraline's real mother had when Coraline was much younger, cradling the half-sleeping child as if she were a baby.

The other mother carried Coraline into the kitchen and put her down, very gently, upon the counter-top.

Coraline struggled to wake herself up, conscious only for the moment of having been cuddled and

loved, and wanting more of it; then realising where she was, and who she was with.

'There, my sweet Coraline,' said her other mother. 'I came and fetched you out of the cupboard. You needed to be taught a lesson, but we temper our justice with mercy here, we love the sinner and we hate the sin. Now, if you will be a good child who loves her mother, be compliant and fair-spoken, you and I shall understand each other perfectly and we shall love each other perfectly as well.'

Coraline scratched the sleep-grit from her eyes. 'There were other children in there,' she said.

'Old ones, from a long time ago.'

'Were there?' said the other mother. She was bustling between the pans and the fridge, bringing out eggs and cheeses, butter and a slab of sliced pink bacon.

'Yes,' said Coraline. 'There were. I think you're planning to turn me into one of them. A dead shell.'

Her other mother smiled gently. With one hand she cracked the eggs into a bowl, with the other she whisked them and whirled them. Then she dropped a pat of butter into a frying pan, where it hissed and fizzled and spun as she sliced thin slices of cheese. She poured the melted butter and the cheese into the egg mixture, and whisked it some more.

'Now, I think you're being silly, dear,' said the

other mother. 'I love you. I will always love you. Nobody sensible believes in ghosts anyway. That's because they're all such liars. Smell the lovely breakfast I'm making for you.' She poured the yellow mixture into the pan. 'Cheese omelette. Your favourite.'

Coraline's mouth watered. 'You like games,' she said. 'That's what I've been told.'

The other mother's black eyes flashed. 'Everybody likes games,' was all she said.

'Yes,' said Coraline. She climbed down from the counter and sat at the kitchen table.

The bacon was sizzling and spitting under the grill. It smelled wonderful.

'Wouldn't you be happier if you won me, fair and square?' asked Coraline.

'Possibly,' said the other mother. She had a show of unconcernedness, but her fingers twitched and drummed and she licked her lips with her scarlet tongue. 'What exactly are you offering?'

'Me,' said Coraline, and she gripped her knees under the table, to stop them from shaking. 'If I lose I'll stay here with you for ever and I'll let you love me. I'll be a most dutiful daughter. I'll eat your food, and play Happy Families. And I'll let you sew your buttons into my eyes.'

Her other mother stared at her, black buttons

unblinking. 'That sounds very fine,' she said. 'And if you do not lose?'

'Then you let me go. You let everyone go - my real father and mother, the dead children, everyone you've trapped here.'

The other mother took the bacon from under the grill and put it on a plate. Then she slipped the cheese omelette from the pan on to the plate, flipping it as she did so, letting it fold itself into a perfect omelette shape.

She placed the breakfast plate in front of Coraline, along with a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and a mug of frothy hot chocolate.

'Yes,' she said. 'I think I like this game. But what kind of game shall it be? A riddle game? A test of knowledge? Or of skill?'

'An exploring game,' suggested Coraline. 'A finding-things game.'

'And what is it you think you should be finding in this hide-and-go-seek game, Coraline Jones?'

Coraline hesitated. Then, 'My parents,' said Coraline. 'And the souls of the children behind the mirror.'

The other mother smiled at this, triumphantly, and Coraline wondered if she had made the right choice. Still, it was too late to change her mind now.

'A deal,' said the other mother. 'Now eat up

your breakfast, my sweet. Don't worry, it won't hurt you.'

Coraline stared at the breakfast, hating herself for giving in so easily; but she was starving.

'How do I know you'll keep your word?' asked Coraline.

'I swear it,' said the other mother. 'I swear it on my own mother's grave.'

'Does she have a grave?' asked Coraline.

'Oh yes,' said the other mother. 'I put her in there myself. And when I found her trying to crawl out, I put her back.'

'Swear on something else. So I can trust you to keep your word.'

'My right hand,' said the other mother, holding it up. She waggled the long fingers slowly, displaying the claw-like nails. 'I swear on that.'

Coraline shrugged. 'OK,' she said. 'It's a deal.' She ate the breakfast, trying not to wolf it down. She was hungrier than she had thought.

As she ate, the other mother stared at her. It was hard to read expressions into those black-button eyes, but Coraline thought that her other mother looked hungry, too.

She drank the orange juice, but even though she knew she would like it she could not bring herself to taste the hot chocolate.

'Where should I start looking?' asked Coraline.
'Where you wish,' said her other mother, as if she did not care at all.

Coraline looked at her, and Coraline thought hard. There was no point, she decided, in exploring the garden and the grounds: they didn't exist, they weren't real. There was no abandoned tennis court in the other mother's world, no bottomless well. All that was real was the house itself.

She looked around the kitchen. She opened the oven, peered into the freezer, poked into the salad compartment of the fridge. The other mother followed her about, looking at Coraline with a smirk always hovering at the edge of her lips.

'How big are souls anyway?' asked Coraline.

The other mother sat down at the kitchen table and leaned back against the wall, saying nothing. She picked at her teeth with a long crimson-varnished fingernail, then she tapped the finger gently, tap-tap-tap, against the polished black surface of her black-button eyes.

'Fine,' said Coraline. 'Don't tell me. I don't care. It doesn't matter if you help me or not. Everyone knows that a soul is the same size as a beach ball.'

She was hoping the other mother would say something like, 'Nonsense, they're the size of ripe onions - or suitcases - or grandfather clocks,' but

the other mother simply smiled, and the tap-tap-tapping of her fingernail against her eye was as steady and relentless as the drip of water droplets from the tap into the sink. And then, Coraline realised, it *was* simply the noise of the water, and she was alone in the room.

Coraline shivered. She preferred the other mother to have a location: if she were nowhere, then she could be anywhere. And, after all, it is always easier to be afraid of something you cannot see. She put her hands into her pockets and her fingers closed around the reassuring shape of the stone with the hole in it. She pulled it out of her pocket, held it in front of her as if she were holding a gun, and walked out into the hall.

There was no sound but the tap-tap of the water dripping into the metal sink.

She glanced at the mirror at the end of the hall. For a moment it clouded over, and it seemed to her that faces swam in the glass, indistinct and shapeless, and then the faces were gone, and there was nothing in the mirror but a girl who was small for her age holding something that glowed gently, like a green coal.

Coraline looked down at her hand, surprised: it was just a pebble with a hole in it, a nondescript brown stone. Then she looked back into the mirror where the stone glimmered like an emerald. A trail

of green fire blew from the stone in the mirror, and drifted towards Coraline's bedroom.

'Hmm,' said Coraline.

She walked into the bedroom. The toys flattered excitedly as she came in, as if they were pleased to see her, and a little tank rolled out of the toybox to greet her, its treads rolling over several other toys. It fell from the toybox on to the floor, tipping as it fell, and it lay on the carpet like a beetle on its back, grumbling and grinding its treads before Coraline picked it up and turned it over. The tank fled under the bed in embarrassment.

Coraline looked around the room.

She looked in the cupboards and the drawers. Then she picked up one end of the toybox and tipped all the toys in it out on to the carpet, where they grumbled and stretched and wiggled awkwardly free of each other. A grey marble rolled across the floor and clicked against the wall. None of the toys looked particularly soul-like, she thought. She picked up and examined a silver charm-bracelet from which hung tiny animal charms which chased each other around the perimeter of the bracelet, the fox never catching the rabbit, the bear never gaining on the fox.

Coraline opened her hand and looked at the stone with the hole in it, hoping for a clue but not finding one. Most of the toys that had been in the

toybox had now crawled away to hide under the bed, and the few toys that were left (a green plastic soldier, the glass marble, a vivid pink yo-yo, and such) were the kind of things you find in the bottoms of toyboxes in the real world: forgotten objects, abandoned and unloved.

She was about to leave and look elsewhere. And then she remembered a voice in the darkness, a gentle whispering voice, and what it had told her to do. She raised the stone with the hole in it, and held it in front of her right eye. She closed her left eye and looked at the room through the hole in the stone.

Through the stone, the world was grey and colourless, like a pencil drawing. Everything in it was grey – no, not quite everything. Something glinted on the floor, something the colour of an ember in a nursery fireplace, the colour of a scarlet-and-orange tulip nodding in the May sun. Coraline reached out her left hand, scared that if she took her eye off it it would vanish, and she fumbled for the burning thing.

Her fingers closed about something smooth and cool. She snatched it up, and then lowered the stone with the hole in it from her eye and looked down. The grey glass marble from the bottom of the toybox sat, dully, in the pink palm of her hand. She raised the stone to her eye once more, and looked through it at the marble. Once again the

marble burned and flickered with a red fire.

A voice whispered in her mind, 'Indeed, lady, it comes to me that I certainly *was* a boy, now I do think on it. Oh, but you must hurry. There are two of us still to find, and the beldam is already angry with you for uncovering me.'

If I'm going to do *this*, thought Coraline, I'm not going to do it in *her* clothes. She changed back into her pyjamas and her dressing gown and her slippers, leaving the grey sweater and the black jeans neatly folded up on the bed, the orange boots on the floor by the toy box.

She put the marble into her dressing-gown pocket and walked out into the hall.

Something stung her face and hands like sand blowing on a beach on a windy day. She covered her eyes, and pushed forward.

The sand-stings got worse, and it got harder and harder to walk, as if she were pushing into the wind on a particularly blustery day. It was a vicious wind, and a cold one.

She took a step backwards, the way she had come.

'Oh, keep going,' whispered a ghost-voice in her ear. 'For the beldam is angry.'

She stepped forward in the hallway, into another gust of wind, which stung her cheeks and face with invisible sand, sharp as needles, sharp as glass.

'Play fair,' shouted Coraline, into the wind.

There was no reply, but the wind whipped about her one more time, petulantly, and then it dropped away, and was gone. As she passed the kitchen Coraline could hear, in the sudden silence, the drip-drip of the water from the leaking tap, or perhaps the other mother's long fingernails tapping impatiently against the table. Coraline resisted the urge to look.

In a couple of strides she reached the front door, and she walked outside.

Coraline went down the steps and around the house until she reached the other Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's flat. The lamps around the door were flickering on and off almost randomly now, spelling out no words that Coraline could understand. The door was closed. She was afraid it was locked, and she pushed on it with all her strength. First it stuck, then suddenly it gave, and, with a jerk, Coraline stumbled into the dark room beyond.

Coraline closed one hand around the stone with the hole in it and walked forward into blackness. She expected to find a curtained anteroom, but there was nothing there. The room was dark. The theatre was empty. She moved ahead cautiously. Something rustled above her. She looked up into a deeper darkness, and as she did so her feet knocked against something. She reached down, picked up a

torch, and clicked it on, sweeping the beam around the room.

The theatre was derelict and abandoned. Chairs were broken on the floor, and old, dusty spiders' webs draped the walls and hung from the rotten wood and the decomposing velvet hangings.

Something rustled once again. Coraline directed her light beam upwards, towards the ceiling. There were things up there, hairless, jellyish. She thought they might once have had faces, might even once have been dogs; but no dogs had wings like bats, or could hang, like spiders, like bats, upside-down.

The light startled the creatures, and one of them took to the air, its wings whirring heavily through the dust. Coraline ducked as it swooped close to her. It came to rest on a far wall, and it began to clamber, upside-down, back to the nest of the dog-bats upon the ceiling.

Coraline raised the stone to her eye and she scanned the room through it, looking for something that glowed or glinted, a telltale sign that somewhere in this room was another hidden soul. She ran the beam of the torch about the room as she searched, the thick dust in the air making the light beam seem almost solid.

There was something up on the back wall behind the ruined stage. It was greyish-white, twice the size of

Coraline herself, and it was stuck to the back wall like a slug. Coraline took a deep breath. 'I'm not afraid,' she told herself. 'I'm not.' She did not believe herself, but she scrambled on to the old stage, fingers sinking into the rotting wood as she pulled herself up.

As she got closer to the thing on the wall, she saw that it was some kind of a sac, like a spider's egg-case. It twitched in the light beam. Inside the sac was something that looked like a person, but a person with two heads, with twice as many arms and legs as it should have.

The creature in the sac seemed horribly unformed and unfinished, as if two Plasticine people had been warmed and rolled together, squashed and pressed into one thing.

Coraline hesitated. She did not want to approach the thing. The dog-bats dropped, one by one, from the ceiling, and began to circle the room, coming close to her but never touching her.

Perhaps there are no souls hidden in here, she thought. Perhaps I can just leave and go somewhere else. She took a last look through the hole in the stone: the abandoned theatre was still a bleak grey, but now there was a brown glow, as rich and bright as polished cherrywood; coming from inside the sac. Whatever was glowing was being held in one of the hands of the thing on the wall.

Coraline walked slowly across the damp stage, trying to make as little noise as she could, afraid that, if she disturbed the thing in the sac, it would open its eyes, and see her, and then . . .

But there was nothing that she could think of that was as scary as having it look at her. Her heart pounded in her chest. She took another step forward.

She had never been so scared, but still she walked forward until she reached the sac. Then she pushed her hand into the sticky, clinging whiteness of the stuff on the wall. It crackled softly, like a tiny fire, as she pushed, and it clung to her skin and clothes like a spider's web clings, like white candy-floss. She pushed her hand into it, and she reached upward until she touched a cold hand, which was, she could feel, closed around another glass marble. The creature's skin felt slippery, as if it had been covered in jelly. Coraline tugged at the marble.

At first nothing happened; it was held tight in the creature's grasp. Then, one by one, the fingers loosened their grip, and the marble slipped into her hand. She pulled her arm back through the sticky webbing, relieved that the thing's eyes had not opened. She shone the light on its faces: they resembled, she decided, the younger versions of Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, but twisted and squeezed together, like two lumps of wax that had melted

and melded together into one ghastly object.

Without warning, one of the creature's hands made a grab for Coraline's arm. Its fingernails scraped her skin, but it was too slippery to grip, and Coraline pulled away successfully. And then the eyes opened – four black buttons glinting and staring down at her – and two voices that sounded like no voice that Coraline had ever heard began to speak to her. One of them wailed and whispered, the other buzzed like a fat and angry bluebottle at a windowpane, but the voices said, as one person, 'Thief! Give it back! Stop! Thief!

The air became alive with dog-bats. Coraline began to back away. She realised then that, terrifying though the thing on the wall was, the thing that had once been the other Misses Spink and Forcible, it was attached to the wall by its web, encased in its cocoon. It could not follow her.

The dog-bats flapped and fluttered about her, but they did nothing to hurt Coraline. She climbed down from the stage and shone the torch about the old theatre looking for the way out.

'Flee, miss,' wailed a girl's voice in her head. 'Flee, now. You have two of us. Flee this place while your blood still flows.'

Coraline dropped the marble into her pocket beside the other. She spotted the door, ran to it, and pulled on it until it opened.