

CHAPTER 9

Outside, the world had become a formless, swirling mist with no shapes or shadows behind it, while the house itself seemed to have twisted and stretched. It appeared to Coraline that it was crouching and staring down at her, as if it were not really a house but only the idea of a house – and the person who had had the idea, she was certain, was not a good person. There was sticky web-stuff clinging to her arm, and she wiped it off as best she could. The grey windows of the house slanted at strange angles.

The other mother was waiting for her, standing on the grass with her arms folded. Her black-button eyes were expressionless, but her lips were pressed tightly together in a cold fury.

When she saw Coraline she reached out one long white hand, and she crooked a finger.

Coraline walked towards her. The other mother said nothing.

'I've found two,' said Coraline. 'One soul still to go.'

The expression on the other mother's face did not change. She might not have heard what Coraline said.

'Well, I just thought you'd want to know,' said Coraline.

'Thank you, Coraline,' said the other mother coldly, and her voice did not just come from her mouth. It came from the mist, and the fog, and the house, and the sky. She said, 'You know that I love you.'

And, despite herself, Coraline nodded. It was true: the other mother loved her. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold. In the other mother's button eyes, Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more. A tolerated pet, whose behaviour was no longer amusing.

'I don't want your love,' said Coraline. 'I don't want anything from you.'

'Not even a helping hand?' asked the other mother. 'You have been doing so well, after all. I thought you might want a little hint, to help you with the rest of your treasure hunt.'

'I'm doing fine on my own,' said Coraline.

'Yes,' said the other mother. 'But if you wanted to get into the flat in the front – the empty one – to look around, you would find the door locked, and then where would you be?'

'Oh.' Coraline pondered this for a moment. Then she said, 'Is there a key?'

The other mother stood there in the paper-grey fog of the flattening world. Her black hair drifted about her head, as if it had a mind and a purpose all of its own. She coughed, suddenly, in the back of her throat, and then she opened her mouth.

The other mother reached up her hand and removed a small, brass, front-door key from her tongue.

'Here,' she said. 'You'll need this to get in.'

She tossed the key, casually, towards Coraline, who caught it, one-handed, before she could think about whether she wanted it or not. The key was still slightly damp.

A chill wind blew about them, and Coraline shivered and looked away. When she looked back she was alone.

Uncertainly, she walked round to the front of the house and stood in front of the door to the empty flat. Like all the doors, it was painted bright green.

'She does not mean you well,' whispered a ghost-voice in her ear. 'We do not believe that she would help you. It must be a trick.'

Coraline said, 'Yes, you're right, I expect.' Then she put the key in the lock, and turned it.

Silently the door swung open, and silently Coraline walked inside.

The flat had walls the colour of old milk. The wooden boards of the floor were uncarpeted and dusty with the marks and patterns of old carpets and rugs on them.

There was no furniture in there, only places where furniture had once been. Nothing decorated the walls; there were discoloured rectangles on the walls to show where paintings or photographs had once hung. It was so silent that Coraline imagined that she could hear the motes of dust drifting through the air.

She found herself to be quite worried that something would jump out at her, so she began to whistle. She thought it might make it harder for things to jump out at her, if she was whistling.

First she walked through the empty kitchen. Then she walked through an empty bathroom, containing only a cast-iron bath, and, in the bath, a dead spider the size of a small cat. The last room she looked at had, she supposed, once been a bedroom;

she could imagine that the rectangular dust-shadow on the floorboards had once been a bed. Then she saw something, and smiled, grimly. Set into the floorboards was a large metal ring. Coraline knelt and took the cold ring in her hands, and she tugged upward, as hard as she could.

Terribly slowly, stiffly, heavily, a hinged square of floor lifted: it was a trapdoor. It lifted, and through the opening Coraline could see only darkness: She reached down, and her hand found a cold switch. She flicked it without much hope that it would work, but somewhere below her a bulb lit, and a thin yellow light came up from the hole in the floor. She could see steps, heading down, but nothing else.

Coraline put her hand into her pocket and took out the stone with the hole in it. She looked through it at the cellar but saw nothing. She put the stone back into her pocket.

Up through the hole in the floor came the smell of damp clay, and something else, an acrid tang like sour vinegar.

Coraline let herself down into the hole, looking nervously at the trapdoor. It was so heavy that if it fell she was sure she would be trapped down in the darkness for ever. She put up a hand and touched it, but it stayed in position. And then she turned towards the darkness below, and she walked

down the steps. Set into the wall at the bottom of the steps was another light switch, metal and rusting. She pushed it until it clicked down, and a naked bulb hanging from a wire from the low ceiling came on. It did not give out enough light even for Coraline to make out the things that had been painted on to the flaking cellar walls. The paintings seemed crude. There were eyes, she could see that, and things that might have been grapes. And other things, below them. Coraline could not be sure that they were paintings of people.

There was a pile of rubbish in one corner of the room: cardboard boxes filled with mildewed papers, and decaying curtains in a heap beside them.

Coraline's slippers crunched across the cement floor. The bad smell was worse now. She was ready to turn and leave, when she saw the foot sticking out from beneath the pile of curtains.

She took a deep breath (the smells of sour wine and mouldy bread filled her head) and pulled away the damp cloth to reveal something more or less the size and shape of a person.

In that dim light, it took her several seconds to recognise it for what it was: the thing was pale and swollen, like a grub, with thin, stick-like arms and feet. It had almost no features on its face, which had puffed and swollen like risen bread dough.

The thing had two large black buttons where its eyes should have been.

Coraline made a noise, a sound of revulsion and horror, and, as if it had heard her and awakened, the thing began to sit up. Coraline stood there, frozen. The thing turned its head until both its black-button eyes were pointed straight at her. A mouth opened in the mouthless face, strands of pale stuff sticking to the lips, and a voice that no longer even faintly resembled her father's whispered, 'Coraline.'

'Well,' said Coraline to the thing that had once been her other father, 'at least you didn't jump out at me.'

The creature's twig-like hands moved to its face and pushed the pale clay about, making something like a nose. It said nothing.

'I'm looking for my parents,' said Coraline. 'Or a stolen soul, from one of the other children. Are they down here?'

'There is nothing down here,' said the pale thing, indistinctly. 'Nothing but dust and damp and forgetting.' The thing was white, and huge, and swollen. Monstrous, thought Coraline, but also miserable. She raised the stone with the hole in it to her eye, and looked through it. Nothing. The pale thing was telling her the truth.

'Poor thing,' she said. 'I bet she made you come down here as a punishment for telling me too much.'

The thing hesitated, then it nodded. Coraline wondered how she could ever have imagined that this grub-like thing resembled her father.

'I'm so sorry,' she said.

'She's not best pleased,' said the thing that was once the other father. 'Not best pleased at all. You've put her quite out of sorts. And when she gets out of sorts, she takes it out on everybody else. It's her way.'

Coraline patted its hairless head. Its skin was tacky, like warm bread dough. 'Poor thing,' she said. 'You're just a thing she made and then threw away.'

The thing nodded vigorously; as it nodded, the left button-eye fell off and clattered on to the concrete floor. The thing looked around vacantly with its one eye, as if it had lost her. Finally it saw her, and, as if making a great effort, it opened its mouth once more and said in a wet, urgent voice, 'Run, child. Leave this place. She wants me to hurt you, to keep you here for ever, so that you can never finish the game, and she will win. She is pushing me so hard to hurt you. I cannot fight her.'

'You *can*,' said Coraline. 'Be brave.'

She looked around: the thing that had once

been the other father was between her and the steps up and out of the cellar. She started edging along the wall, heading towards the steps. The thing twisted bonelessly until its one eye was again facing her. It seemed to be getting bigger now, and more awake. 'Alas,' it said. 'I cannot.'

And it lunged across the cellar towards her then, its toothless mouth opened wide.

Coraline had a single heartbeat in which to react. She could only think of two things to do. Either she could scream, and try to run away, and be chased around a badly lit cellar by the huge grub-thing – be chased until it caught her. Or she could do something else.

So she did something else.

As the thing reached her, Coraline put out her hand and closed it around the thing's remaining button-eye, and she tugged, as hard as she knew how.

For a moment nothing happened. Then the button came away and flew from her hand, clicking against the brickwork before it fell to the cellar floor.

The thing froze in place. It threw its pale head back blindly, and opened its mouth horribly wide, and it roared its anger and frustration. Then, all in a rush, the thing swept towards the place where Coraline had been standing.

But Coraline was not standing there any longer. She was already tiptoeing, as quietly as she could, up the steps that would take her away from the dim cellar with the crude paintings on the walls. She could not take her eyes from the floor beneath her, though, across which a pale thing flopped and writhed, hunting for her. Then, as if it was being told what to do, the creature stopped moving, and its blind head tipped to one side.

It's listening for me, thought Coraline. *I must be extra quiet.* She took another step up and her foot slipped on the step, and the thing heard her.

Its head tipped towards her. For a moment it swayed and seemed to be gathering its wits. Then, fast as a serpent, it slithered for the steps, and began to flow up them, towards her. Coraline turned and ran wildly up the last half-dozen steps, and she pushed herself up and on to the floor of the dusty bedroom. Without pausing, she pulled the heavy trapdoor towards her, and let go of it. It crashed down with a thump just as something large banged against it. The trapdoor shook and rattled in the floor, but it stayed where it was.

Coraline took a deep breath. If there had been any furniture in that flat, even a chair, she would have pulled it on to the trapdoor, but there was nothing.

She walked out of that flat as fast as she could, without actually ever running, and she locked the front door behind her. She left the door-key under the mat. Then she walked down on to the drive.

Coraline had half expected that the other mother would be standing there waiting for her to come out, but the world was silent and empty.

Coraline wanted to go home.

She hugged herself, and told herself that she was brave, and she almost believed herself, and then she walked around to the side of the house, in the grey mist that wasn't a mist, and she made for the stairs, to go up.