



Chapter One

A Completely Non-Magical Day Without Any
Ghosts, Talking Animals or Faeries

There was no stopping it. Once someone became entrenched in fiction they rarely found their way out. Elves, aliens, talking teddy bears, Row rarely met a person that had gotten over every childhood story. Even his no-nonsense old boss still walked around in his completely nonsensical 'lucky socks'. Row's accountant liked sevens a bit too much. The barista downstairs read tea leaves. No one but Row got over the childish belief that there was something special

about anything. He'd left all that nonsense back home, a place he would never return to. Ever.

His mother's stories had been particularly sticky things to get away from, and he never wanted to tempt fate and near them again. He didn't want to suffer the fiction affliction with the rest of the nonsense world.

Row didn't think fiction needed to be banned or anything like that, it just made him personally uncomfortable. That wasn't to say nonfiction was always warranted in his mind either. He certainly didn't care much for Chrys's collection of "Totally Real Hauntings and Other Nonsense about Faeries" books. It was the general principle of the thing. If something wasn't real (or even sounded the least bit fake) there was no point in putting it to words. As for fantasy...well, for adults it seemed like reasonable escapism, but maybe something a little too corrupting for the fragile minds of children.

Take Chrysocolla for example. There was nothing wrong with his girlfriend, she was sweet and caring, and optimistic to a point of uncanniness. While she never wore shoes, there was nothing about her fashion sense that was wrong. She could have easily turned out to be a normal woman. That is, she could have if she'd never heard a ghost story. From the early days of her childhood she'd been told about 'her gift'. According to her mother, Zelda, Chrys was in tune with the spirit world. In actuality, Chrys had a good ear for houses creaking, a gullible personality, and a talent for cold readings.

Row took a seat at Zelda's coffee table. Chrys's mother lived above a coffee shop uptown. The apartment was always musty, stuffed tightly with old dark blankets and quilts. Incense lingered in the

air. And while Zelda believed in ghosts, she didn't believe in chairs. Row fell backwards as he tried to balance on one of the throw pillows covering the floor.

Zelda sneered in his direction before focusing in on her daughter. "Do you feel that in the air, Chrys?"

Chrys nodded, closing her eyes in an all-knowing stoicism. "I sense a shadow nearing town."

"Spooky." Row looked back to the window. The sky was looking a little on the grey side. "Here, I think I have a prediction on this." He reached into his pocket, pulling out his rare and all-knowing prediction brick, then consulted the weather app. "Oh, never mind it's saying there's a thunderstorm watch. Too bad, no demons or ghosts tonight."

"Row..." Chrys opened her one eye slightly. "You know that thunderstorms are catalysts for spiritual activity. With that sort of raw energy. Honestly."

"Oh right, how silly of me." Row sighed louder than expected, burying his face in his phone. Maybe there was work he could escape to? Nothing.

He forced his attention back to the spectacle unfolding in front of him. Zelda and Chrys had met hands across the table and were now chanting. It was all gibberish, of course, but impressive gibberish. With the ambiance of the room and a little lead in, Row could easily see the two swindling some poor widow or lovesick teen. Not that they'd do that, since they were equally hoodwinked by their theatrics. They gave away predictions for free, sharing the

gifts as was 'the right thing to do'.

As their chanting continued, the room became eerily dark. The storm quickened its pace, blacking out the dismal grey. The women synchronized into a hum, a buzz like static before a lightning strike blinded the room.

"Death approaches." Chrys whispered, flinching back at the thought. "It's in a garden. There's roses. Do you see them?"

Row crinkled his brow and spoke dryly, "Oh no, did I kill the rosebush?"

"Ignore him." Zelda squeezed Chrys's hands. "I see it too."

"It's not our garden, this is somewhere else. It's far away." As Chrys worked herself up, tears built in her eyes. They welled up, then poured down her cheeks while Zelda, too lost in the game, failed to notice. "There's a sickness." Chrys trembled, wincing back in an imagined pain. Their seances were usually a lot more lighthearted than this, involving giggly messages from happy spirits. The tears quickened down her cheek, her body beginning to look frail and sick. Even if it was fake, Chrys thought it was true. She thought she was sharing somebody's pain.

Row jumped forward, grabbing Chrys's hand as a boom of thunder shook the house.

"Row!" she cried out, eyes open and staring at him. "You're not supposed to interrupt."

He scowled at her, grabbing one of Zelda's many scarves from a nearby stack of clutter. He used the silk to dab her eyes, wiping every last tear away. "It looked like you needed help," he said as he

finished his work.

While Zelda glared at him, Chrys softened. Her blue eyes glistened like a vast but stormy sea. Her hands relaxed from their trembling, finding their way back to the safe and mundane reality.

“He’s right, Mama.” She nodded back at Zelda. “We need to be careful, we could be letting evil spirits into this house.”

Zelda’s mouth became a flat line as she looked up at Row. Even after six years, she couldn’t puzzle out what her daughter was doing with someone like Row. Zelda once approached him about whether or not he was possessed, or just a monster. Row hadn’t given her a response, and after that he stopped leaving himself alone with her.

“You’re right. He should leave,” Zelda said.

Row flinched. “Me?”

“Yes you.” Zelda folded her arms over her chest. “You’re always bringing evil spirits in here. With your heart the way it is...it’s really no wonder.”

“You mean my hypotension?” Row raised his brow. It wasn’t exactly the right word, but it was the best descriptor he had. After a blood test gone wrong, Row came to the realization that something was wrong with his heart. After numerous poking and prodding doctors he still wasn’t closer to the answer on what exactly was wrong with it. In fact, he didn’t really care to find out.

“You know exactly what I mean,” Zelda scolded, glaring right over the top of her glasses.

“Actually, I really don’t.” He huffed, but got off of his seat all the same. “But if you really don’t want me here, I guess I’ll be off.”

“Row.” Chrys gripped his hand before he could make it any further. “I don’t want you leaving mad. Mama, it’s not Row’s fault that his heart is a vector for evil spirits.”

“A vector for evil spirits?” Row furrowed his brow. That was a new one.

“Oh, we didn’t tell you?” She glanced back at Zelda. “It’s just a guess, but no matter what, it isn’t your fault. I wouldn’t want you walking home in this weather anyways, right Mama?” She gave Zelda a stern look.

“I guess it wouldn’t be wise,” Zelda admitted. “If death is looming—fine. But at least leave the room. Maybe we’ll get a clearer picture of whatever is trying to reach us.”

“Fine.” Row rolled his eyes, giving the ladies their space. He turned his back to Chrys’s concerned face and made his way for the kitchen.

It was a little while longer before their silly chanting resumed, when Row was gone from sight. The kitchen was no different than the rest of Zelda’s house. The woman was a packrat who made optimum use of every inch of space available. This was, of course, a complete opposite to Row’s minimalistic approach to life. He only owned what was needed and didn’t care much knick-knacks. Her crystal collections rattled as thunder rumbled the house, the storm awakening as they resumed their chants.

Through the window at the end of the junk tunnel, Row watched the flurry of rain. It pelted down onto the glass, turning it into a warbled reflection of himself—a face staring back at him from beneath the water. He stared for a moment, transfixed by the image and the electricity created by the voices down the hall. A stinging

started in his chest the longer he stared. As he winced, the reflection glared at him. It raised its hand, pressing its fingers to the glass as Row remained still. The picture became clearer when the lightning flashed. It illuminated the reflection. Then it became a woman, a completely different person in a completely distant world. She looked a lot like Row, same eyes, same chubby cheeks. But her hair was longer than Rapunzel's and anger burned in her eyes.

“No.” Row shook his head. “We’re not doing this.”

The woman said nothing, though her brow raised like a villain whose patience was being tested.

He stomped across the floor, pushing past the tight corridor of junk. They met eyes at the end, both an inch from the glass. In either hand he grabbed folds of burgundy curtain. “You stay out of my life, Sundew.” He threw the curtains shut.



After his run in with the window, things returned to normal. In fact, Row decided that it hadn't happened at all. Sundew? What Sundew? He rolled his eyes at the thought. He hadn't seen his.... um...eccentric sister in years and it was doubtful he'd see her again. He took Chrys by the hand and walked home with her.

They hadn't needed to wait out the storm. It ended as quickly as it had appeared. Chrys and Zelda's second attempt at contacting the spirit world failed because of this. Zelda blamed Row for knocking them off course of the energy. They couldn't catch up their power

to match the storm before it ended. Or something like that...Row dozed off somewhere in the middle of the explanation.

Chrys held his hand tight in her own. She pulled and jerked his arm as she danced across the street, splashing through the puddles. She'd certainly pepped up after the seance. Puddles did that to her. She couldn't resist running barefoot through a puddle, ocean, lake, you name it. If she came across a bog it was likely that Chrys would dive in and live with the turtles. Row had many reasons why he didn't join her, not the least of which being a slight fear of drowning. Even puddles were too close for comfort—but he walked through them because he wasn't silly. He tried his best to fear only reasonable things.

“It's a pity that we didn't get back on track.” She sighed, bouncing into him. She wrapped her arms around the closest of his, then rested her head on top of him. “The image that I saw was so clear, you know? I want to know who it was, maybe warn someone before she died.”

“She?” He scrunched his brow.

“There was a woman in my vision, older—but not too old. She had these beautiful green eyes, and I could tell that everyone around her loved her.” Chrys drooped, saddened by her story. “She was in this beautiful garden and was tending to her roses...and then I could see death shroud over her. She started getting sicker and sicker...”

Row squeezed her hand. “People die every day.”

“I know that.” Chrys's shoulders slumped. “But that doesn't mean I don't want to help. You'd be surprised how many souls

don't make it to their resting place. People hold onto them, and they hold onto people, things, their homes. Sometimes, they need the permission to move on."

"I'm sure she'll contact you if she needs the help."

Chrys leaned into him more with a wistful breath. "I guess so."

"There's no use worrying about it. You're plenty helpful, so don't get down about yourself."

She met him with a smile. "Thanks Row."

He shrugged. Even if she was playing pretend, her heart was in the right place. He couldn't knock that.

"You know, I'm sorry that Mama's always on your case," she said. "I've tried talking to her, but honestly it does get a little uncalled for."

"It's fine, I'm used to it."

As much as Zelda chased him down about his tainted soul and demonic possession, it didn't seem to come from a bad place. There was plenty that a mother could hate about Row for no good reason. This included his heart issue, so maybe some points had to be taken from Zelda, but it mostly involved a part of his life that Row didn't like to put to words. Row used to be a girl. No, Row was assigned female at birth. No, Row was transgender. No, he didn't like any of the phrasings. If phrases had flavours all them tasted like vomit.

But returning points to Zelda, no matter how it was phrased, she didn't care. In fact, Zelda cared so little that the second she knew about it, she invited the self-described 'non-binary goddess' Fox Mackenzie into her life. She did this to drive home how much she didn't care about that particular aspect of his person. She assured him that she

hated him because he was him. She did this by insisting Chrys was available and definitely not dating that man in the corner—just ignore the grumpy man in the corner, Fox.

Fox certainly got along with Chrys. Ze was a confident and self-assured barista, with those ear hole things that were all the rage. Ze drank almond milk, had a quaff of red fire for hair, and was the only person on earth that was taller than Chrys. Any time ze asked the question, “And what can I get for you today, Hon?” zir customers fell in a hopeless and heartfelt love. Well, except for the grumpy man in the corner.

But for however much Zelda pressured the two to fall in love, they only ended up as friends. Good friends, church going pals but nothing more.

A flutter from above caught Row’s eye. The heavy thump of a crow landing on a branch above startled him from his thoughts. He jumped back, stumbling into Chrys.

“Hm?” Chrys trailed his gaze up to the bird.

It stared directly at Row with its button eyes. Actual buttons, not a metaphor. The bird was completely made of craft supplies. It stretched its wings and amongst the shadow was a rainbow of mismatched craft feathers; pink, blue, green, even swirls of glitter glue. It gripped the tree above with pipe cleaner feet.

“Oh, what a pretty bird.” Chrys squinted up at it. “Aw, poor thing’s got its foot tangled.”

Row swallowed a lump in his throat. A perfect pink bow was secured to its purple pipe cleaner feet. At the end of the ribbon’s tail

there hung a pink envelope, the colour of magnolias.

“Come here bird,” Chrys cooed. “I’ll untie you, sweetheart.”

“Chrys.” Row grabbed her arm before she got closer. “This is dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” She turned back to scowl at him.

“It could peck you. Or maybe its diseased.”

“I am not diseased,” the crow said.

Row froze.

The crow fluffed her feathers, leaning down to get a good look at Row. “Very rude to say about a lady. But that’s what we’ve come to expect from the likes of you.”

Row tightened his hand around Chrys’s. As he looked to her, he expected some sort of excitement or shock...but she didn’t appear to notice that the crow had spoke at all. She was still stretching forward, cooing at the bird like a mad woman. He jerked her back. “We’re not going to get it out, let’s just go.”

“Oh.” The bird scoffed. “Ignoring me?”

“But what if it’s hurt? It could lose its foot in the twine,” Chrys said.

Row turned his back on the crow, dragging Chrys along with him. “There’s nothing we can do. It’s up too high.”

“What are you talking about? If I stretched only a little bit—”

“No.” Row stomped on ahead.

“What’s gotten into you, Row?” Chrys struggled to keep up, scraping her heels on the sidewalk as she tried to slow them down. “You’re so moody today.”

“Moody?” He scowled as he checked back to see the bird. It remained in the tree, watching them as they disappeared down the sidewalk.

“Yes, since the seance...oh no, did a spirit find its way into your heart?” She gasped.

“You two are more obsessed about my heart than the doctors.” He rolled his eyes, keeping watch for the bird until it was gone from view entirely.

“There’s something bad in town, Row. You’re highly susceptible to things like this...and honestly you’re not careful about it at all. At the very least you could drink some clover tea, wear a luck charm or two.”

Row frowned. “Wouldn’t avoiding bad luck be good too then? Avoiding death omens like—and this is just an example—crows?”

Chrys rolled her eyes. “Fine.”



When Row returned to his house, things seemed normal. The normal squirrels chased one another in a normal way around the oak tree in Row’s normal front yard. As much as Row couldn’t stand the thieving squirrels, it was nice to be away from the strange encounters. The squirrels bounced after one another down his driveway, weaving through the sunflower stalks in the flower bed.

Row’s house was small, a teal thing that Chrys demanded they rent because of its colour. She would have preferred a sea foam house,

but there weren't any around town. To make up for its faults she enlisted Row to tend to a garden, filling the front and backyard with flowers and her whims. The front lot was packed with sunflowers which grew above the living room windows. In the winter she bemoaned their absence daily. The backyard was more complex, a sprawl which centred around Chrys's absolute favourite flowers, the roses.

As the two went inside they split apart at the kitchen. It was Chrys's turn to make dinner—or she said it was at least. She preferred to make the meals so she could hide broccoli in the soups and kale in the sandwiches. Today's health food endeavour was pasta and flax with a medley of vegetables. Row grimaced at a zucchini as he passed Chrys. To avoid any meddling, he went outside to tend to the roses, scoffing as he remembered Chrys's silly prediction.

An audience of squirrels gathered in the branches of the willow and spruce trees, staring at Row as he began to garden. Five or six of them were already fat for winter, stuffed with tulip bulbs they'd stolen the day before. They made great work of tearing up the garden after he'd worked for hours. It wasn't enough to make him give up (unfortunately for him). As much as he disliked gardening, it was something that made Chrys happy.

He trailed his focus back up. The squirrels twitched and shifted, squabbling to get a better view of potential snacks. But too bad for them, because today Row only planned to tend to the roses. He scraped the dead leaves from the roots, thorns catching his sweater as tails twitched incredulously above him.

As he dug out the dampened leaves into a pile of sludge, one of the squirrels grew bored. This particular squirrel reminded him more

of a chinchilla, a circular grey puff. The branches wobbled as another rotund squirrel climbed off the trunk. Then another. Row rolled his eyes. The boughs above shook as a final squirrel made her way down, a leaner one, not grey. Not red either. She was made of paper, her tail a smudge of black charcoal.

The colour drained from Row's cheeks.

She stared at him like she was a normal squirrel.

"Shoo!" He waved his hands in front of her. "I don't want anything to do with you guys."

The squirrel said nothing, sniffing him quietly.

A haze of clouds passed over the sun, and the squirrels looked up before breaking away like dandelion fluff. Row stood, continuing to look around him for where the craft squirrel had come from. There's no way they found me, he thought. We're too far from Honey Walls...they'd never...

The big black crow thumped onto one of the low branches. Her two button eyes transfixed on Row, envelope still shackled to her foot. As she leaned forward her beak nearly touched the rosebush.

"Why are you making things difficult, Rosie?" The crow cawed, clearing her throat.

He stumbled, the name enough to knock him back. It'd been so long since he'd heard it. Since he'd heard an animal talk. He eyed the window of his house. Inside Chrys was dancing, making spaghetti and lost in a trance.

"Don't mind the squirrel, she came with me." The crow flapped her wings, tucking them at her sides. "Paper Squirrel only came

for the tulips. If you're thinking of planting more, it's a fight you're guaranteed to lose." The crow preened as she spoke. "Free wisdom from me to you."

"What are you doing here?" He stood, shielding the crow from the window, so Chrys wouldn't see the absurdity.

The crow tilted her head, examining every inch of Row. "I don't usually part with information like that."

"You're a lousy messenger to send if that's the case," he said.

She hung on his last word, staring at him intently with her button eyes.

Row fidgeted, monitoring the window as he searched his pockets for something to trade with her. If he had something shiny, he could maybe get her to leave. But there was nothing a crow would like. Just my keys. "Sorry, I've got nothing."

She froze. "So the rumours are true, the city's made you greedy?" She tilted her head, inspecting his rose bush with one eye. "I'd make a deal with you for your roses."

His expression soured. "One rose."

"Greedy," crowed the crow. "I'll take one of your wilted roses if you really must be stingy."

Row glared at the crow. The flowers were meant for Chrys. Tending to them was always the trickiest, always leaving him scarred by thorns...but he couldn't risk having the bird around either. He searched the bush for the bloom with the least potential and cut its stalk. With obvious disgust, the crow snatched the rose with her beak. However, despite her distaste for the flower, she loosened the

ribbons from her legs. The envelope fell free onto the rose bush.

“I don’t want that.” Row kept back.

“Too bad.”

Row felt a burning begin in his chest. The letter was the same magenta as the ribbon, subdued like magnolias and resting on a bed of thorns. The lip of the fold was embossed with swirling flowers. “Is it...it’s not from Mom, is it?”

The crow leaned forward, beak outstretched for another rose.

“You can’t answer a question without a present?” He rolled his eyes. “And you call me greedy.”

She ruffled her feathers in opposition.

Row ignored her, bracing himself as he took the letter from the bush. Written across the front was his old name, Rose Gareau Jr. “Right, I guess—” He shook his head. “No. This is ridiculous. What am I doing?” He shoved the envelope into the crow’s face. “Take it back where it came from. I’m not getting involved in this again.”

The crow turned her head away, beating her wings wildly. Within seconds she took off, snapping the branch with her weight. She left the envelope in Row’s hands, a definitely real envelope. He pressed his fingers down hard on the paper, watching the bird swirl into the grey sky.

His fingers trembled. He checked back to the window, making sure Chrys wasn’t watching. When all was clear he tore the envelope’s side. The inner paper had a weighty tooth and ridged surface like water colour paper. The hard crease, the dribbles and water smudges... seeing high quality parchment defaced this way made him queasy.

Well, it made him queazier.

Dearest Rosie,

You are a special kind of idiot if you think you can avoid me.

You're needed back in Cherrywood. I have some paperwork that needs to be signed.

Mom's dead.

Your Sister,

Sundew Gareau

The paper fell from his hands.