

CHAPTER 1

You Can Never Be Completely Sure What Might Happen Next

RUBY REDFORT WAS PERCHED ON a high stool in front of the bathroom window, her binoculars trained on a cake delivery truck that had been parked on Cedarwood Drive for precisely twenty-one minutes. So far no one had emerged from the truck with so much as a blueberry muffin. Ruby gurgled down the last dregs of her banana milk and made a note in the little yellow notebook that lay in her lap. She had six hundred and twenty-two of these yellow notebooks; all but one were stashed under her bedroom floorboards. Though she had taken up this hobby nine years ago, no one, not even her best friend, Clancy, had read a single word she had written. Much of what Ruby observed seemed pretty mundane, but **EVEN THE MUNDANE CAN TELL A STORY {RULE 16}**.

Ruby also kept a vivid pink notebook, dog-eared and smelling of bubble gum, and it was in this that she listed her Ruby rules — there were seventy-nine so far.

RULE 1: YOU CAN NEVER BE COMPLETELY SURE WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN NEXT. A truth no one could argue with.

Ruby was a petite girl, small for her years — at first glance a very ordinary looking kid. There was nothing particular to mark her out — nothing, that is, until you looked a little longer. Then you would begin to see that her eyes were ever so slightly different shades of green. When they looked at you, it was somehow hard to remember the point you were arguing. And when she smiled she revealed small doll-like teeth, which somehow made it impossible to consider her anything *other* than a cute kid. But the most striking thing about Ruby Redfort was that when you met her you felt a strong need for her to like you.

The bathroom phone rang. Lazily, Ruby reached out and groped for the receiver.

“Brandy’s Wig Salon. Hair today, gone tomorrow.”

“Hi, Rube,” replied the voice on the other end. It was Clancy Crew.

“So, Clance, what gives?”

“Not a whole lot actually.”

“So to what do I owe the pleasure of this call?”

“Boredom,” yawned Clancy.

“So why don’t you get yourself over here, bozo?”

“Well, I would, you know, Rube, but my dad wants me home.

He's got some kinda embassy type function and he wants us all smiling, you know what I mean?"

Clancy Crew's father was an ambassador, and there was always some function or other in progress. Ambassador Crew liked to have his children scrubbed and serving canapés to prove what a great family guy he was — though truth to tell he was usually too busy to even remember their birthdays.

"Some people have all the fun," drawled Ruby.

"Yeah, my life stinks," said Clancy.

"So cheer yourself up, why don'tcha. Scoot yourself over, watch a few toons, and you'll still be home in time to smile for the cameras."

"OK, Rube, you've talked me into it. See you in ten."

Ruby put down the phone. It lived on a shelf with two others: one was in the shape of a conch shell, the other disguised as a bar of soap. She had a whole lot more of them in her bedroom. She had been collecting telephones since she was about five years old, all in different shapes and colors. The donut phone was her first — the latest, a cartoon squirrel sporting a tuxedo. Just about all of them had come from yard sales.

She was about to continue her bathroom-based surveillance when the intercom buzzed. Ruby's parents had sensibly fitted them on each floor to keep shouting to a minimum.

She pressed the *Speak* button.

“Hello, how may I be of assistance?”

“Howdy,” came the voice from the other end of the intercom. “This is Mrs. Digby, your housekeeper. May I please remind you that your parents will be home from Switzerland in two and a quarter hours.”

“I know, Mrs. Digby, you told me that a half hour ago.”

“Glad you remembered. May I also point out that they may be a little grief stricken to see the state of your bedroom.”

“It’s my style, Mrs. Digby — ‘layered.’ It’s very in vogue.”

“Well, may I continue to remind you that some magazine folks are coming to photograph this very house tomorrow, and if your mother sees it in its ‘layered’ state, you will be in what’s commonly referred to as ‘the dog house.’”

“OK, OK,” Ruby sighed. “I’ll take care of it.”

The Redfort house, dubbed the Green-Wood house on account of its environmental features, had been designed in 1961 by famous architect Arno Fredricksonn. Even now, a decade or so later, it was still considered state of the art and was regularly featured in architectural journals.

Ruby returned to the bathroom, sat back down on her stool, and continued to stare out of the window. The truck was still there

but now there was a raccoon sitting on its roof. The bathroom door opened, and in ambled a large husky dog, which sniffed around before settling down to chew the bathmat.

“Bored, huh?” said Ruby, slipping off her stool. She padded into her bedroom and surveyed the wreckage. It was not a pretty sight. Ruby wasn’t so much untidy as she was a spreader — she had a lot of stuff, and when she was busy working on something the *stuff* had a habit of creeping from one surface to another, and this was what her mother did not like.

“Darn it!” muttered Ruby. If the magazine people were coming, her mom would just about freak if this was what they saw. She could almost hear her father saying, “*For the sake of your mother’s sanity — do something, Ruby.*” So she set about slipping records back into their sleeves and pushing books onto shelves. Ruby had a lot of books; they were arranged floor-to-ceiling across one end of her room.

A FICTION SECTION: both English and foreign titles.

FACTUAL: comprising anything.

COMICS: subject — largely crime and mystery.

Ruby and Mrs. Digby had a shared enthusiasm for crime and thrillers: fact or fiction, whether in book form or on the screen. They would often sit down with a large bowl of blue corn chips and watch the quiz show *What's Your Poison?* When Ruby was several years younger, Mrs. Digby would settle Ruby to sleep by reading one of her favorite crime thrillers, *The Claw at the Window*.

PUZZLES: Puzzles were Ruby's passion. Any kind of puzzle: crosswords, anagrams, riddles, even jigsaws — anything that needed to be solved by finding the “pattern,” the “trick,” or the “key.” This had led Ruby to . . .

CODES: She had read many books and essays on the subject. In fact she was a subscriber to *Master Code Monthly*, a little known Chinese subscription-only magazine. Subscribers had to prove their code-cracking talent before they were permitted to sign up. It was this journal that had led her to read the following:

* Garp Einholt's *The Theory of Code: Its Abstract Duality and Subtext* (to be honest, Ruby had found this overstated and not a little tedious).

* Sherman Tree's more vital *Unlock My Brain*.

* Anya Pamplamous's thirty year study of codes, *The Puzzles That Lie Within*, which she also very much enjoyed.

But her personal handbooks were both written many centuries ago: one by the Greek philosopher Euclid with the simple title of *X*; the other a tiny indigo book (origin unknown) that was filled with all manner of codes. It explained riddles and poems and equations—patterns, symbols, and sounds. It was a code breaker's bible.

Having dealt with the books, records, and papers, Ruby began the more complex task of sorting through clothes; all of which seemed to be on the floor of her closet. It was here, underneath a pile of knee-high striped socks, that she unearthed her glasses.

Boy, am I glad to see you!

Although Ruby would on occasion wear contact lenses, she didn't much care for them; they had a habit of falling out at exactly the wrong moment. If Ruby Redfort had an Achilles heel, it was her eyes; without some sort of visual aid, life was just a blur.

There was another buzz from the intercom. "Yuh huh?"

"What are you doing?"

“I’m un-messing. Why?”

“Just checking.”

“Mrs. Digby, you are one suspicious woman.”

Having put away as many of her clothes as she could be bothered to put away, Ruby grabbed all the remaining garments and stuffed them down the laundry chute. She was in the habit of tipping all sorts of things down the laundry chute — even, on occasion, herself. It saved time.

Judging her work finished, Ruby’s finger hovered over the TV’s *On* switch, but her attention was caught by what sounded like activity in the kitchen. Seven years ago she had rigged up a reverse periscope device so that she could see what was occurring in the kitchen below. Today she saw Mrs. Digby taking a fresh batch of cookies out of the oven.

Nice work, Mrs. Digby.

She slid her notebook carefully inside the hollowed out doorframe, and went downstairs.

**RULE 2: IF YOU WANT TO KEEP SOMETHING SECRET,
DON’T LEAVE IT LYING AROUND.**

CHAPTER 2

There's a Lot of Truth in Fiction

WHEN RUBY ENTERED THE STYLISH, modern kitchen, she was automatically handed a vile-smelling green drink. Ruby glared at Mrs. Digby, bearer of the unfortunate liquid.

Mrs. Digby shrugged. "Don't look at me, it's your mother's orders — she wants you to grow." Sabina was always trying to get Ruby to eat foods that might promote growth. "Personally I don't see what's so wrong with being short," Mrs. Digby added. "I've always been short, and it's never stopped me from getting by in the world."

This was true. Mrs. Digby was probably one of the smallest and most determined people one could meet. She had been with the Redforts long before Ruby was born, and before that she was housekeeper to Ruby's mother's parents. Her face resembled an autumn leaf — dry and covered in lines. When she applied lipstick, it bled along the tiny cracks around her mouth, creating miniature rivulets. She was getting on in years, but no one was exactly

sure of her age. If asked she usually answered, “Sixty, seventy, eighty . . . who’s counting? Not me, that’s for darn sure.”

Mrs. Digby spoiled Ruby whenever possible but never, ever, went against Mrs. Redfort’s dietary instructions. Sabina Redfort was always putting her household under one health regime or another, and Ruby and her father dreaded them *all*.

Ruby took the drink without arguing, brought it to her lips and said, “Mrs. Digby, could I have just one cookie, just to take the taste away?”

Mrs. Digby considered the request for a mere moment. “Well, your mother didn’t say you couldn’t—so I guess it would be all right.” She turned her back for a second, maybe two, and in this tiny moment Ruby poured the drink down the sink, having been careful to first make sure she got some of the green liquid on her upper lip.

“Yuck!” said Ruby.

“There’s a miserable kid,” said the housekeeper, wiping Ruby’s face as if she were still just a toddler. Mrs. Digby looked at Ruby’s T-shirt, which bore the statement ***some days stink*** and muttered, “Well, who can argue with that.”

She paused.

“On second thought, your mother will. If I were you I might avoid the trouble by changing into something, you know—frilly.”

Ruby made a face. “Frilly” was neither in her vocabulary nor her wardrobe. As far as her attire went, she was more often than not dressed in jeans, sneakers, a T-shirt printed with either a somewhat hostile word: **bozo**; an interesting number: **1729**; or some less than agreeable statement: **bored beyond belief**. But she knew what Mrs. Digby meant, and she knew she had a point.

The backstairs door opened, and in walked a young woman followed by three large boxes of heirloom tomatoes balanced on a pair of skinny legs.

“Hola, Ruby. How are you?” said the woman.

“Bien, gracias, Consuela,” replied Ruby. “Hey, is that you under there, Clance?”

“I think so,” muttered Clancy, struggling to heave the boxes onto the counter. He rolled his eyes. “I’ll just go and fetch the others.” Clancy was a good-natured person. Mostly he tended to like people, but he didn’t much like Consuela. Too bossy. Mrs. Digby was no big fan either.

The trouble had begun when Sabina Redfort rather rashly decided that Mrs. Digby’s cooking was too stodgy and that they should adopt a more olive oil and tomato based diet. This had led to the hiring of dietary expert Consuela Cruz. Consuela had been flown over from Seville, Spain, along with many suitcases

and countless cooking utensils, and though her salary was eye-watering, Mrs. Redfort considered her to be worth every penny.

The new diet may have been helping maintain healthy hearts, but it certainly wasn't generating much love. Mrs. Digby made a muttering sound deep in her throat, Consuela clucked her tongue, and both women left the room by different doors. Ruby, now alone, piled several cookies (ten to be exact) on to a plate and went about making herself some more appealing drinks (two banana milks with strawberry ice-cream). The banana milk was imported from Europe, for though Brant Redfort had tried, it seemed impossible to find anywhere inside the USA.

Ruby popped straws in both drinks and carefully carried them out of the kitchen, sucking on one of the straws as she went. She was about to climb the stairs when she caught sight of the little light on the answering machine flashing to indicate a message. She pressed *Play*.

"Hey there, Redfort gang! It's the Humberts here. Freddie and I were just saying how much we would like it if you all came over. And Quent would just adore to see darling Ruby! Call us back, won't you! Bye bye bye!"

This voice belonged to Marjorie Humbert, a family friend, wife of Twinford City bank manager Freddie Humbert, and the mother of Quent, the dullest boy in town. Ruby automatically pressed *Erase* and continued on her way. She was followed by the large husky.

“Hey there, Bug,” cooed Ruby. “Wanna watch some TV?”

When she entered her room she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Mrs. Digby was right: if she wanted to avoid a whole lot of grief she might want to put on a dress. She rummaged through her closet until she found an interesting red and white number she had picked up at a thrift store—if Ruby wore anything other than jeans and T-shirts, then it was usually secondhand. She was one of those girls who people talked about as “having her own style,” which was sometimes meant as a compliment and sometimes not. The hem of the dress was secured with sticky-tape, but it was hardly noticeable if you weren’t looking too closely.

Ruby pulled on some black over-the-knee socks and a pair of Yellow Stripe sneakers. The dress still retained its thrift store odor, so Ruby sprayed herself with some expensive perfume. (Oriental Rose: she had a sizable collection of beautifully bottled fragrances which, when worn, mingled with the odor of the bubblegum she so often chewed, creating a unique Ruby Redfort fragrance.)

Clancy had not yet reappeared, so Ruby carried the tray of

snacks up the open-tread staircase that connected her room to the roof-top. She liked to sit up here on warm evenings looking at the stars, writing in her notebook, reading, and, more than occasionally, watching the portable TV. She settled down in the beanbag, in one hand a cookie and in the other a large green apple. She believed that the healthy attributes of the apple might counteract the bad effects of the cookie. (Ruby Redfort had a lot of theories like this one.)

She looked up when Clancy popped his head through the trapdoor. Clancy was a shortish, scrawny looking boy—not exactly your “yearbook kid” but certainly one of the most engaging characters you were likely to talk to, if of course you bothered to *talk* to him, which most people didn’t.

“Oh, boy! I had to make a dash for the stairs or she would have had me peeling tomatoes for the rest of my life. I wouldn’t mind but tomatoes give me hives.”

He slumped down next to Ruby, who was busy flipping through the channels. Ruby was a keen watcher of TV—she watched *a lot*. She loved sitcoms, dramas, news shows, quiz shows, documentaries, but it was the detective shows that were her TV passion, and *Crazy Cops* in particular. *Crazy Cops* was a police drama that Ruby and Clancy were practically addicted to; it was very informative while at the same time being extremely

entertaining. They had both picked up a lot of knowledge about police investigations and human behavior from watching *Crazy Cops*. “*There’s a lot of truth in fiction,*” was something Ruby was fond of reminding her parents whenever they complained about her “TV habit.” Sunday night, however, was toon night, and they were just into a fourth episode of *Grime Girl of the Crime World*, when Ruby heard her parents’ car pulling into the driveway.

Clancy looked at his watch and groaned. “I guess I gotta go. My dad won’t exactly see the funny side if I’m late.”

“That’s too bad, Clance. But hey, don’t forget to smile.”

“Yeah, yeah, some friend you are. I’ll call you later.”

He left by climbing from the roof onto a branch of the large tree handily positioned right next to the house—from there he could shinny his way down to the yard. Ruby descended more conventionally, by way of the stairs.

Noticing that she had forgotten to tackle the large pile of shoes in the middle of the room, she fetched the beanbag and placed it on top. The room looked magazine-shoot tidy. She took one last look in the mirror, then adjusted the barrette securing her long dark hair in a firm side-part, giving her a look of utter composure.

Satisfied, Ruby sort of half walked, half hopped downstairs, followed silently by Bug.