

A hand-drawn scroll with a central rectangular panel containing text. The scroll is unrolled at the top and bottom, with the ends of the paper visible. The text is written in a simple, slightly irregular font. The scroll is drawn with fine lines and shading to give it a three-dimensional appearance.

The Ten Riddles of Eartha Quicksmith

Hidden within this book are two bonus puzzles
for you to solve:

Follow clues in the ten pictures to piece
together a ten-word sentence from nearby pages.

Find all the Quicket symbols scattered throughout
the book (most of them look like this: Q)

Have fun and check into www.quicksmiths.com
for hints, or when you have your answers.

Who knows, Quicksmiths might be on the
lookout for someone just like you...



Chapter One

The Coin

Someone's watching me.

Kip looked down from his favorite hideout halfway up the Chess Nut Tree. A couple of Saturday joggers and dog walkers went by, but they all had their eyes on the ground.

He returned to his homework, which was balanced on the flattest part of the Halfway Branch. But he'd written only a few lines when that unmistakable feeling of being watched came back, stronger this time.

There was definitely no one looking up at him. As usual, Ashleigh had disappeared with her squawking friends right after dropping him off. And Chess Club didn't start for twenty minutes.

Who is it? he wondered.

Kip shifted his weight to scan the park behind him, then pulled back instinctively. Silently hovering

between the bare branches, and swaying ever so slightly, was a flat, oval drone. It was white and metallic and about the size of Kip's hand. Two fat antennae stuck up from the front, and at the top of each antenna was a bright, emerald light that turned the nearby branches a ghostly green.

After a few seconds, Kip said, "Hello?"

The drone did not respond. Kip noticed with a sense of unease that it was expanding and contracting gently.

Looks like it's breathing.

Like a floating, futuristic beetle, the drone moved closer, weaving slowly through the branches. It stopped just as Kip could see his forehead and short-cropped brown hair reflected in its gleaming side, distorted like your face when you look into the back of a spoon.

"What do you want?" he challenged.

The reflection of his own eyes looked back—a mixture of glittery brown and light gray, as if copper and iron had half melted together.

Kip tried waving a hand cautiously in front of the green antennae tips and, at last, the drone did something. With a quiet *whirr-click*, a tray slid out from its underbelly.

In the tray was an envelope, and below the first-class stamp there was something handwritten in dark-red ink:

To Kip Bramley

Kip picked up the envelope. It could be a prank. He checked thoroughly in every direction: still no suspects in sight. Carefully, he pulled open the glued-down flap so it came away without ripping.

Instead of a letter inside, Kip found a coin. It was a little bigger than a quarter, only it was gold, not silver, and it had seven edges. He held the envelope upside down and gave it a gentle shake. Nothing else fell out.

“What...?”

But his question faded away as he looked up. The drone had gone.

A few people were setting up their chessboards on the tables underneath the tree. Voices drifted up through the branches stripped clean by winter.

“Spring is finally here.”

“Can’t believe it’s warm enough to have Chess Club outside already.”

Kip put the coin back in the envelope, zipped it safely into his backpack and began to climb down. It wouldn’t be long before everyone else arrived— young and old, tall and small—all brought together by their love of the game.

After Chess Club, Ashleigh was waiting. To earn her wage, she had to pick Kip up and take him home to Eelstowe housing estate. As usual, she dumped him at

the front door of his apartment like she was a bored delivery girl with something much better to do.

“Be right back,” she said, tapping at her phone.

It was often hard to tell if she was talking to him or saying her texts out loud.

Kip let himself in, sat down at the small kitchen table and took the envelope out of his backpack.

Who would send me this? In a drone? he thought.

It couldn't be a mistake. There was his name in dark-red letters on the envelope. Kip ran his fingers around the seven edges of the coin.

On one side was a strange candle with a flame at each end. On the other, there were just three words:

CHANGE YOUR WORLD

There was a jangling of keys outside, and Kip hastily returned the gold coin to its envelope as the front door opened.

The Pointers

The Pointers lived a few doors down and Mr. Pointer was employed by the council to do repairs on the sixty or so apartments in their building. Ashleigh, their daughter, had finished school last year. Now she sold second-hand vinyl records online to make money. Almost as soon as the Bramleys had moved in, she had been hired by Kip's dad, Theo. Her job:

to hang around when Theo was working late shifts or overtime, which was most days.

“Does she have to? She’s so annoying,” Kip had complained after a few weeks. “And I’m too old to have someone looking after me.”

Theo had picked up the family photograph on the windowsill and stroked the glass with his thumb.

“I worry about you, that’s all...”

As his dad had blinked away tears and hugged Kip tightly, Kip had felt his own eyes prickling.

“Sorry. I know, Dad. It’s OK. Ashleigh’s not that bad really.”

A hand waved in front of Kip’s face, interrupting his thoughts.

“Hello Kipper,” crooned Ashleigh.

She leaned against the fridge, loudly picking food out of her teeth and holding another reminder from the electricity company for Mr. T. Bramley to pay the bill, written in big, shouty letters.

“It’s Kip,” he said for the two-hundredth time.

But Ashleigh was already yelling at someone behind her.

“Dad! DAD—you coming?”

She turned back to Kip and looked at her phone instead of at him.

“Your sink’s blocked.”

A lanky, gray-haired man carrying a rusty toolbox creaked slowly into the kitchen after Ashleigh. Close

behind him was a large woman wearing rubber gloves and waving a duster.

“You been washing noodles down the drain again, Kip?” asked Mrs Pointer. “Course you have.” She prodded Mr. Pointer with a yellow finger.

“Tony, it’s noodles. Check for noodles.”

Mr. Pointer grunted and Mrs. Pointer scanned the kitchen for anything of interest. Her greedy eyes noticed the envelope in Kip’s hands.

“What’s that? A party invite? Course it is. See Ashleigh, he’s making new friends already. Didn’t I say he would?”

Ashleigh looked up from her phone.

“Wassat?”

“Who’s it from, dear?” asked Mrs. Pointer.

Kip slipped the envelope behind his back and inched away.

“Exactly ... a party invite. From ... erm ... ’scuse me for a minute.”

“Must be a girl...” Mrs. Pointer’s voice trailed off from the kitchen.

On his way to hide the envelope, Kip glanced at the menu on the worn-out corkboard in the hallway and smiled. Theo Bramley was a chef, and every week he made up a daft theme. He was a genius with food, turning everyday supermarket ingredients into fiendishly realistic creations.

Last month had ended with *Supervillain Banquets*, and March had begun with *Disgustible Dining*. The last couple of days had already included some of Theo's finest creations ever.

Thursday / Dinner

Tentacle-and-beak surprise with extra ooze
Twice-boiled drain toad on peppered slug tracks
Pickled zombie skin in slime mold trifle

Friday / Dinner

Find-the-eyeball soup
Runny sock-cheese with wet dog armpits
Lice pudding in four-sneeze sauce

They were going to be hard to beat, but today's menu looked promising.

Saturday / Lunch

Coughed-up hairballs and bedbug couscous
Chef's fingernails in garbage-juice jelly

Saturday / Dinner

Bellyflap mushrooms on furry green toast
Elephant earwax stir-fry with thousand-year-old cabbage
Bath-scum ice cream with grated frostbite

In the kitchen, Ashleigh and Mrs. Pointer started arguing about something and Kip hurried away to his bedroom. Above him, a small white butterfly crawled across the white-hot bulb of the hallway light. Had

Kip looked up, he might have wondered why the heat wasn't frying the insect's delicate wings into two flapping crisps.

Pinky

Once the envelope was stowed safely between two pages of a big blue notebook, Kip put the book inside Pinky's lair. This was a tall, metal storage rack from a used-furniture shop, which Kip and his dad had adapted, adding wire mesh to make a secure hutch with lots of roaming room. One of Kip's happiest memories was creating a paradise for Pinky inside: apple tree branches, rope swings, toys and comfy hiding places packed with shredded old clothes. A board tied to the mesh proclaimed "DANGER" in pink paint.

"Pinky, guard this with your life! Don't let anyone near it!"

Pinky was curled up in her favorite napping nook—a half of a coconut shell Theo had saved from work. Two chocolate-drop eyes peered out from under a scrap of Kip's outgrown pajamas. Beneath them, a small smudge of a nose twitched at the center of a spray of long, dainty whiskers.

This was her way of saying, "I am Pinky—security guard—licensed to kill—message received."

"However bad school at Ledhill gets," Kip said, "you were worth it, Pinky."

His cell phone beeped and Kip grabbed it eagerly, thinking it might be a message from his best friend, Hal. It had been weeks since he'd heard anything.

We're short-staffed again :(Back before dinner. Don't forget your homework. Sorry, Dad.

Doubly disappointed, Kip left the phone on the bed and wandered back to the kitchen to find that Mrs. Pointer had put his plate of coughed-up hairballs on the fold-out dining table. Now she was dusting two photographs on the chipped windowsill.

"This is such a good one," she said, holding up the plain wooden frame. "What's the joke?"

"No joke, really," said Kip. "You just had to be there." It had been taken in one of those photo booths that prints out a strip of four different snapshots. Theo and Kip were making uglier and uglier faces in each picture, except the last one where they had both collapsed in laughter.

"And this, so beautiful, such a beautiful family."

She dabbed a faded golden frame with her stained duster.

Theo had his arm around the shoulders of a girl with braces on her teeth and her hair done up in twisty buns: Kip's older sister, Suzie. That photo sometimes seemed more real than his memories of her—memories that came and went like the sun trying to break through thick clouds: her zebra-stripe slippers; falling off her BMX; the garden den she built from

old sheets. Theo's other arm was around a pretty woman with light brown hair just like Kip's. Rosalind Bramley—or Rose, as everyone called her. On her knee was a toddler as chubby as a dough ball—mini-Kip. The sun was shining behind them so their faces weren't very clear, but you could tell they were all smiling.

“So tragic,” Mrs. Pointer said as if Kip wasn't even there. “Isn't it just like a story from the news?”

Kip pretended to blow on his lunch a lot and made sure his mouth was always full so he didn't have to say anything.

“Falling in love at the museum,” babbled Mrs. Pointer. “So romantic. Meets the handsome chef at the Valentine's Day chocolate fountain. Then happy families ... But such heartbreak...”

Sometimes when Kip was thinking about his mother, he found himself twisting the piece of quartz crystal that hung on a thin leather cord around his neck. When he looked at it, tuning everything else out was easy—even Mrs. Pointer's babbling.

All those years ago, after the lightning struck, Theo had found Rose and five-year-old Kip on the path from their old house to the sea, and she had been clutching this fragment of quartz tightly. Although unconscious, Rose hadn't relaxed her grip. It was only later, in the hospital, that she had woken and called Kip over. With great effort, she had pressed it into his hand and spoken a single word: “keep.” With

all the bad stuff that was happening, everyone except Kip had been much too busy to give it more than a fleeting glance.

To Kip, the forking pale-blue icicle was both beautiful and terrible. There was a shape inside that only appeared in the right light, and it was there as he stared down now: an amber wave trapped forever in the moment of breaking. Every so often, staring at it was like trying to remember something.

“And how is your mother doing, dear?” asked Mrs. Pointer, suddenly standing right next to Kip.

“OK, I s’pose,” said Kip, shifting uncomfortably. “The same...”

The bedbug couscous had now cooled down enough to finish in a few bites.

Kip took his plate back to the kitchen, grabbed his bowl of garbage-juice jelly and an orange, and excused himself to do his homework.

Both bedrooms were tiny, but Theo had given Kip the larger one, so there was just enough space for a small desk next to Pinky’s lair. Kip squeezed past the wardrobe and put down his bowl.

Inside her lair, Pinky’s face emerged from the coconut cradle. Kip’s lunchtime was only halfway through her usual ten hours of sleep, but her delicate nose snuffled alertly in the direction of the jelly. Then the tiny flying squirrel darted out of the half-coconut and scampered up the wire mesh until she was hanging upside down from the hutch roof in line with

Kip's ear. She somehow clung to the wire expertly while she scratched under her chin with one back paw, and blinked sleepily.

“Come on, Furball,” said Kip, opening the lair door to let Pinky out. “You can have some orange. But no jelly.”

Pinky's daily routine usually went something like this:

04:00 – 05:30 rope climbing; ladder scurrying; search for secret nut stash

05:30 – 06:30 rockstar rehearsal with toy cymbal and/or bell; investigate different sleeping options

06:30 – 07:00 bedtime snack and cuddles

07:00 – 17:30 hide away from bright sunlight in one of the following a) scarf hammock b) sock nest c) coconut cradle d) Kip's pocket or under Kip's shirt; sleep, squeaking occasionally; forget location of secret nut stash; get up for mid-sleep fruit snack

17:30 – 18:00 chirruping and waking-up cuddles

18:00 – 21:00 breakfast; play Find-the-Raisin; curtain climbing and gliding practice; more breakfast; watch Kip go to sleep

21:00 – 04:00 guard Kip

As Pinky nibbled on her orange slice, Kip opened the big blue notebook and shook the coin out of its

envelope on to the bed. The boy and the squirrel stared at the heptagon of shiny metal.

“Look, Pinky. Someone’s sent me a weird coin. But why? It’s not like I collect them.”

Pinky dropped the orange and tried to flip the coin over as if the answers to Kip’s questions might scuttle out from underneath.

“And what about that drone? I agree. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Frowning, Kip opened the notebook. On the front were these words:

BOOK OF SQUIRLS, PART 13

Sometimes, when Kip was thinking really hard about something, the space behind his closed eyes would fill up with irresistible patterns: squirrels. It was a childish word now for a boy his age, but he didn’t care; it was the name his dad had given them.

“Your drawings are halfway between squiggles and swirls,” he had said. “Squirrels.”

Kip flicked through the pages. He had been drawing squirrels for as long as he could remember, but had never really found the exact words to explain what they were. To him, they felt alive with veins of light instead of blood, and sometimes it even seemed as if he shared the same pulse.

Pinky yawned and crawled up Kip’s arm to snuggle in the crook of his elbow. He stroked her

silky brown back gently with one finger and she closed her eyes and sighed a tiny sigh.

Kip reached across to the desk for a pen and closed his eyes too. But not to sleep. It wasn't long before a squirl shimmered and rippled into focus from the far distance. As Kip drew, it felt like he was sailing along its waves and rolling down its bright corkscrews. And when he was lost in a squirl like this, the hours could sail and roll away like minutes...

“Knock, knock.”

The door opened a crack, then widened and Theo Bramley entered the room. He was a short, broad-shouldered man with a kind face and a neat salt-and-pepper beard.

“Sorry I'm so late,” he said. “But the good news is our weekend starts ... now!”

At the sound of Theo's voice, Pinky woke with an excited chirp. Kip jumped up to get a hug that smelled of freshly baked bread, and Theo rubbed the soft bristle of Kip's hair with his knuckles. They sat back down on the bed and Pinky ping-ponged between her two favorite people in a blur of brown-and-white fur until Theo produced a sweet potato treat from his shirt pocket. Pinky took it delicately with her teeth and began to eat, nibbling and squeaking at the same time.

Theo stood up to straighten the duvet and Kip's cell phone slid off the bed.

“Anything from Hal today?” asked Theo gently, putting it on the desk.

Months ago, when Theo had quit his old job, they had moved to London and ended up in this apartment on the estate. That had meant starting a new school for Kip—Ledhill Community School—and leaving his best friend Hal behind.

At first, Kip and Hal had texted and called all the time, and visited each other on weekends whenever they could. But then, disaster had struck: Hal moved to Australia with his family. As the weeks passed, Hal’s replies took longer and longer to come back and Kip felt more and more alone.

“I guess he’s busy,” said Kip.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll always be close. But he’s started a whole new life on the other side of the world. He’ll need to make new friends there.”

Theo looked down at the half-drawn pattern in the Book of Squirrels.

“Things getting any easier at Ledhill?”

Kip tried to put on a brave face. He didn’t want his dad to worry.

There were three groups in his class. First, there was the sporty group, but Kip didn’t like the way they shoved each other for fun and picked on the kids who weren’t good at gym class. Kip didn’t belong with the show-offs either: they talked noisily about how brilliant they were, did math out loud and boasted about how many awards they’d won. And the cool

kids just made fun of everything everyone said and mocked anyone who dared to do well in class.

Then there was The Snibbug.

Kip's homeroom teacher—and the dreaded Head of the Science department—was Miss Gubbins. But when Kip said her name backwards it seemed to suit her much better.

The questions The Snibbug asked made Kip wonder if she thought all children were stupid. She actually called some of her students “dense” or “dull-skulled” if they didn't get something right the first time. Most infuriatingly of all, she swallowed yawns when Kip was answering her questions.

Kip's “it's fine” face didn't fool his dad.

“Perhaps I should talk to Miss Gubbins,” he suggested.

“No, it's OK,” said Kip hurriedly. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

“Maybe you could invite a friend to come to the climbing wall with us?” Theo said.

Kip said nothing. There was no one he could call a friend, never mind a best friend.

“Let's give it to the end of the semester and see if things get better.”

Kip nodded. But he knew it would feel like forever until the holidays.

“Look what I found,” he said, changing the subject.

Won't mention the drone. Probably just a bored, rich kid. Don't want Dad to overreact and cancel Chess Club or something.

Theo took the gold coin.

“Hmmm,” he said. “That’s unusual. Heads: it’s leprechaun gold and gives you three wishes. Tails: it can only be used in special shops to buy cans of Bigfoot food.” He flipped the coin.

“Heads it is.”

Six chimes spilled out from the clock in the hallway.

“Better get dinner on,” said Theo, giving Kip the coin back. “Don’t know about you, but I could eat an elephant.”

“Think we’ve only got elephant earwax,” Kip replied, trying to keep a straight face. “Double helping?”

The Vending Machine

Like all the best Sundays, the next day was full of promise. Kip and his dad wallowed in the morning and lazed through lunch. But as always, the afternoon ran into the evening too fast and another Monday came stomping up to crush the short-lived weekend under its heel.

Kip usually sat at the back of the classroom, trying not to get called on for anything. On this dull Monday

morning, he felt occasionally for the cold, smooth coin in his pocket—to check to see if it was still there.

When school finished, there was no one to say goodbye to, and he hurried to the gate where Ashleigh was waiting. He passed Olly Gorton, the boy from his class who had made it his mission in life to be as unfriendly to Kip as possible. Olly was always boasting about his hunting knife, as if he liked the idea of making other kids uneasy.

Don't turn around, Kip thought. Don't ask me who Ashleigh is.

Kip's back arched involuntarily as he thought about the Claw Chair. For the last few weeks, someone kept swapping his chair for the spare one with the sharp nail that stuck out. He had suspected Olly and challenged him in front of everyone. It didn't turn into a fight, but after that someone drew the outline of a knife in pink glitter pen on his desk. And the Claw Chair kept on turning up.

Kip tapped Ashleigh on the shoulder and walked on ahead as fast as he could.

“Where's the fire?” Ashleigh complained, unable to text and keep up with Kip's get-away-from-school pace at the same time. “Wait! I have to buy tomatoes.”

Kip stayed outside the grocery store watching an ant carrying a breadcrumb. He followed it around the corner of the building and came across a vending machine on top of a thick black pole.

They must have put this up over the weekend, he thought.

The upper half of the machine was clear and, instead of gumballs, Kip could see a pile of plastic eggs inside. The bottom half was made of steel, into which these words were stamped:

CHANGE YOUR WORLD

Kip took the gold coin out of his pocket.

Knew I'd read that somewhere before.

There were so many things he wanted to change in his world, but only one really mattered. His fingers felt around the shape of the crystal pendant hidden safely out of sight under his shirt as always.

There was only one option. The coin rattled down inside the machine. A few seconds later, a plastic egg dropped into the collection drawer. As he picked it up, Kip felt his heart pick up a beat too.

The plastic egg opened easily and inside Kip found two things: an oblong pin badge with a protective peel-off cover, and a piece of folded paper.

Really? A stupid badge? What a scam.

He put the badge in his pocket and unfolded the paper, hoping for something more promising. The last thing he was expecting was a wordsearch

The theme was Types of Energy. Twelve letters had been circled with dark-red ink, making a diamond in the grid. In a blank space under the wordsearch,

someone had scribbled something, also in red ink. Kip recognized the handwriting from the envelope.

You already have the other half.

Questions poured from his head like the overflow from a hydroelectric dam.

Other half of what? How can this possibly be meant for me? Who knew I would put the coin in that machine—and get that exact egg?

Kip took the badge out of his pocket. On closer inspection, it looked broken and there was no pin at the back to attach it to his clothes. The cover peeled away easily, revealing a honeycomb-patterned red candle. At each end of the candle was a white flame and in each flame was a golden eye.

The image on the coin!

Things were looking less and less accidental. It was hard to believe, but someone had planned this. Someone was trying to get a message to him.

The shop doorbell tringed as Ashleigh came out.

“Wassat?” she muttered, glancing at the badge.

“Just a stupid free gift,” said Kip, putting it back in his pocket.

It wasn't long to wait until he was back in his bedroom, away from prying eyes. Everything was peaceful: it was an hour until sunset and Pinky was still sleeping in her scarf hammock. Silently, Kip

placed the drone-delivered envelope, the candle badge and the wordsearch on his desk.

First, he picked up the wordsearch and looked at the letters that had been circled.

q i k m t s n i e y u o

Kip spent ages thinking about those twelve letters. He read them backwards. He looked at them upside down and in the bathroom mirror, in case they spelled out something in the reflection.

“Anagrams...” he whispered suddenly.

But when he tried jumbling up the letters into something that made sense, this was the best Kip could do:

I quit monkeys

Mini sky quote

My quiet oinks

This isn't going anywhere, he thought. *Try something else.*

On his desk, still awaiting inspection, were the candle badge and the envelope. He picked up the badge first. There was a slider on the side, which he pushed up and down, but it didn't do anything. So he turned his attention to the envelope.

It was made of ordinary paper, but that didn't mean it couldn't be hiding something. None of the letters in his name were bold, underlined or highlighted.

And there were no hidden flaps. Kip knew lemon juice had something to do with invisible ink, so he dabbed some on the page. But all that did was make it smell of lemons.

There was a rattle in the lair, and Kip looked up to see Pinky gnawing the edge of her cuttlebone.

“What am I missing, Pinky?” he asked.

Kip opened the lair door and held up the badge, the wordsearch and the envelope. Pinky bounded over, extended one paw uncertainly and sniffed at the envelope.

Clock Face

“You’re right,” Kip said. “It’s definitely the envelope. But why?”

He looked at the stamp in case there was a postmark showing where the envelope had been sent from. And then excitement sparked between his ribs.

“I’ve got it, Pinky! Why would you put a stamp on a letter delivered by drone?”

The stamp looked innocently stamp-like—small and square and smooth.

“Maybe it folds out?”

But it was just as thin and flat as a stamp should be.

The picture on the stamp was of a red brick clock tower with a yellow face. Outside in the hallway, the Bramleys’ clock ticked encouragingly.

The time might be a clue, Kip thought.

But the yellow clockface on the stamp was blank, with no hands or numbers to mark off the hours. Kip stared at it so long that his eyes started crossing.

“Anyone home?” Theo’s voice drifted in from the hallway.

Kip shoved the candle badge and the wordsearch in the envelope, hid it under his pillow and ran out to greet his dad.

By the time dinner was finished and they had played an hour of Find-the-Raisin with Pinky, Kip’s eyes wouldn’t stay open and he fell gratefully into bed.

Late that night, when the dark was at its darkest, Kip woke up from a dream that promptly faded. With a surge of excitement, he remembered the unsolved mystery and lifted the corner of his pillow. Now, in the still of night, there was something different about the envelope. A faint, yellow glow was radiating from the corner where the stamp was.

Instantly awake, Kip opened the curtain. He didn’t want to hurt Pinky’s sensitive nocturnal eyes with sudden bright light, and the streetlight that seeped in was just enough to see by. From the highest platform in her lair, she watched curiously as Kip dived under his bed to search for a box of old, abandoned toys. After an impatient hunt, he held up a chipped magnifying glass like the prized trophy of a lost civilization.

Staring down into the ghostly circle of the magnifying glass was like looking into a shadowy

well, with the stamp floating at the bottom. And there, around the stamp's clock face, glowing in the dark, were twelve tiny letters instead of numbers.

By the soft light of the moon and the streetlight leaking through the window, Kip copied these luminous letters on to a piece of paper.

u c s i h i v t s o c m

Twelve letters, he thought.

Somewhere in the toy box was a flashlight. It still worked, and soon Kip was examining the wordsearch. There were exactly twelve letters there too, circled in red.

q i k m t s n i e y u o

Underneath them was the unsolved clue: "You already have the other half."

One by one, he wrote down the letters from the wordsearch, slotting them in between the letters he had already copied from the stamp. The two halves of the puzzle fitted together perfectly.

"Quicksmiths..." he whispered.

"...invites..."

Pinky chattered softly, sensing something important.

"...you com."

Quicksmithsinvitesyou.com? A website. And an invitation?

Kip waited impatiently for his ancient, second-hand laptop to start up, while anticipation drummed like fingers on his ribcage.

When the website finally loaded, there was hardly anything on it. Just the candle symbol again, an address, a date and a time and his name.

88a Helix Avenue, London

March 20th

Kip Bramley

Appointment time 09:30

Underneath, there were two download buttons. One linked to a chess puzzle and the other to a series of large emojis.

“Not exactly answers, Pinky. And nearly two weeks until March twentieth.”

As Kip closed the laptop lid, his eyes started to shut down too, so he climbed back into bed.

Pinky kept watch silently, making sure that her human was safe and all was well. From her vantage point in the third-floor apartment, she looked down at the tops of the streetlamps, clinging on to the night and refusing to give up their light. A white butterfly circled one of them energetically. The little flying squirrel watched it with interest until the orange glow of dawn began to spread across the sky like Kip’s favorite breakfast jam.