

LOOM OF FATE
by
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Chapter One

Karl Swenson might have been one hinge short of a nuthouse door, but he was the only person in town who would offer Banjo an after-school job. The museum didn't cost anything—hardly anybody ever came in anyway—but Swenson never missed a paycheck. It wasn't much, but nobody else wanted to hire an eighth grader. Besides, it'd be a pretty easy job if Desmond didn't work there too.

For a moment Banjo considered sneaking away. The school day had been bad enough, but now he'd have to deal with Desmond. But he couldn't just walk out on Mr. Swenson, so he took a deep breath and pushed open the door. It bleated like an angry goat. Banjo startled and turned to look for the sound.

"Not baaaaaad, eh, Benjamin?" Swenson looked up and slid his glasses to the bridge of his nose with a forefinger. "Got tired of the old bell so I rigged up the door to sound like an old nanny goat. What do you think?"

"It's, uh, cool?" Banjo scanned the room for any sign of Desmond. To his relief, he saw only Swenson, tinkering with a dead bird on his worktable. It looked like a short, round penguin with a large orange beak. "What are you working on?"

Swenson fiddled with the bird's tail feathers. "I found this stuffed puffin at the dump. People throw everything away. Baggage! Nobody understands the value of anything anymore. I'm installing a radio in it. See? If you look carefully, you'll see where the cord comes out its as-- ah, tuchus."

Banjo leaned over a case full of painted toilet seats. "Desmond not here today?"

"Where else would I be?" Desmond strutted around the corner. He was two years older and a foot and a half taller than Banjo, and thought he was the light of the world.

"I was just doing your work, loser. Think fast!" Desmond chucked a broom at Banjo, who barely had time to duck and grab the broomstick before it crashed into a display of dead things in Ball jars that smelled of formaldehyde. "You sweep up in back. I've got a date tonight, something you'll never understand, so I don't want to get all sweaty." He flipped his wavy blond hair. "Not yet anyway. And next time don't be late."

Banjo looked at Swenson. "I got in trouble for daydreaming in History and had to stay after school."

"Ha! You really are a loser! I never got in trouble in History."

"Yeah, 'cause you never went to class. Maybe that's why you flunked eighth grade."

"So? What's it to you?"

Swenson turned something in the puffin's bill. "What are they filling innocent heads with these days?"

"Nothing. Just Vikings."

Swenson stopped puttering with the bird. "Interesting! I've studied the period extensively."

Desmond stopped gazing at his reflection in a display case. "On purpose?"

Swenson laughed. "It's a fascinating subject. If I lived back then and knew what I know now, I could have changed the world."

Desmond grunted. "Good one."

"You don't believe me?" Swenson smiled mysteriously. "There's more to me than meets the eye."

Banjo picked up a Volkswagen made from a real beetle and replaced it on a shelf displaying other dead-bug toys. "At least you don't have to write a report about it."

Swenson buffed the puffin's beak. "I could write a book." He pulled a glass tube out of the radio, looked at it closely, blew on the connectors, and put it back inside the bird. "You know, I used to have some artifacts from back in those days." He stuck his screwdriver under a wing and gave it a couple twists. "Most likely in some dusty box in the attic. Might help you with that report." He slapped the puffin on top of its head. The radio whistled and static came from a speaker in the bird's belly. "Ah! There it goes." The static faded. "Baggage!"

"Yeah, Northgate. Why don't you go up in the attic so nobody'll see you if any customers come in."

Swenson poked something in the puffin's beak. "Things look pretty good down here right now. Desmond, go on up there and help Benjamin look around."

"But it's dirty and I don't want to mess up my clothes. Besides, nothing will help him pass that class. I had Curdfiddle last year. She doesn't know how to give good grades."

"Curdfiddle?" Something about that name finally pulled Swenson's attention away from the radio. "Edna Curdfiddle? She still kicking around? We dated back when we were young. Quite a kisser, that one."

Banjo tried to block the image of Swenson and Curdfiddle lip-locking, but the harder he tried, the more he thought about it.

Swenson looked wistfully into space for a moment, then winked at Banjo. "Go on. You know where the stairs are." He dug around in his pocket and tossed Banjo a rusty key.

Banjo looked at the key. He wasn't so sure he wanted to know what was tucked away in the hidden corners of the museum. The display area was strange enough. "No, really, it's no big deal. I'm okay."

Swenson shrugged. "Suit yourself. I don't really need any help today, so you can have the afternoon off. Or you could go upstairs, look for something to help with your report, and stay on the clock."

"I don't know about this," Banjo said. "Maybe I should just go."

"Come on, moron. I need the moolah." Desmond grabbed Banjo's sleeve and pulled him to the back room. They stepped over piles of bags full of who-knows-what to get to the red velvet rope that stretched across the bottom of a stairway.

Desmond slapped the sign that hung from a rope on the stair rail. "Authorized personnel only! That's us."

Banjo hesitated. "Don't you think it's a little funny that he's suddenly letting us go up there?"

"Dude, he's paying us to fool around in the attic. Does it get any better?"

Banjo paused. "I dunno. I thought you didn't want to get dirty."

"You've got the key. Come on!" Desmond pulled Banjo up the stairs.

The steps sagged and creaked as they climbed to the top. Banjo wiped the rust off the lock, slid the key inside, and jiggled it until it clicked.

The door squeaked open without being pushed. Desmond shoved Banjo through the door and followed him inside.

Banjo brushed aside the cobwebs that stuck to his face and made him sneeze. Sunlight oozed into the attic through filthy windows at each end, casting shadows across vague shapes that loomed in the dusk. A gust of wind groaned through the rafters.

A string hung from a bare light bulb. Banjo stretched, but his fingers barely brushed against the string. "Hey, Desmond. Can you turn on this light? I can't reach it."

"I'm surprised you can reach your fingertips. When you get married you'll need a stepladder to kiss the bride. Like you'll ever get married. Out of my way." Desmond tugged on the string. It clicked, but the light didn't turn on.

Something brushed across Banjo's cheek and he shivered. He looked around at the strange shadows and piles of stuff. Dust made his nose run. "This isn't such a good idea. Let's get out of here."

"Are you kidding me? Look at all this awesome junk!"

"I gotta write my report, and you've got that hot date with your mom. Maybe we can come back when we have more time to sift through things."

A gust of wind groaned through the rafters and the door thudded closed. Banjo reeled and grabbed for the doorknob.

"It's just the wind. What'd you think?" Desmond flung his hands at Banjo. "Ghosts?"

Banjo jumped.

Desmond laughed. "Dork! That's for my mom. Now open the door."

Banjo rattled the door handle. "It's locked!"

"You have the key, doofus. Unlock it."

"Um, problem. The key's on the other side."