

Chapter One

Porcelain mines in Russia? Whoever heard of such a thing?

Hi! My name is Rose. Ramblin' Rose. They call me that because I ramble from one thing to another when I talk. I talk about everything! I ask a lot of questions. I want to know about the whole world! And I don't always believe the answers I get. I have to find out for myself!

At twelve years old, I am the youngest editor ever on the school paper at The Brookhaven School for Girls. I also publish it on the Internet for other curious kids (of all ages!). My English teacher, Ms. Canfield, says I'm a natural reporter. She also says I have a "great imagination".

She does not always believe the stories I write are true. However, Ms. Canfield says, "We must encourage our students' creativity!" So, I keep writing the stories. I happen to know they are true. You can judge for yourself.

We live in a big old house by Minnehaha Creek in Minneapolis. I like being in the Midwest because it puts me in the middle of all the action. Besides, being twelve, I don't have a lot of choice in the matter.

My parents are both "professionals" and our house is very nice. Since my Dad works for the government (and I can't tell you what he does – or his name – secret, you know)

John & Marlene Carson

we have a lot of security systems and even a chauffeur! He's really my bodyguard, but he gets me around.

My mom is a corporate whiz kid. She is President (with a capital "P") of an online firm specializing in rating and analyzing trends for big corporate entities. She is always on the go. Which leaves me (an only child), Richard, the chauffeur slash bodyguard and my dog Samson the Great (Sam for short), a big black Newfie. Mom likes to take Sam to dog shows. It's a hobby of hers. "And, he makes a good protector for a young girl," she says. I like to fall asleep on him.

There I go ramblin' again! I'm telling you all this so you will be more likely to believe me when you read the stories I have written. One day I may win a Pulitzer Prize! There are other things you should know, but I'll tell you as we go along. Now that I have you here, I wouldn't want to bore you.

It all started like this...

It was Thursday. Richard picked me up from school. Mom and Dad were at work and probably would be until evening. We drove up to the house and Richard got out of the limo. After checking the security he opened the door and let me out. I went into the house, while Richard pulled the car around back, and went about his chores.

When I opened the front door, Sam was there to greet me, as always. He liked it when Mom was away so he would not get scolded for playing. He knew better than to jump on me and knock me over, so he sat there with his tail swishing on the marble floor of the entryway. I set down my books and hugged his neck.

"Get the toy!" I shouted.

He had the toy ready and "woofed" as he picked it up, so we played Tug-of-War. Sam always won, pulling me across

The Porcelain Mines in Russia

the slick floor while I tried to hang on to the slippery handle. Today was no different. Except that the toy slipped out of my hands and sent me crashing backwards into the china cabinet.

I landed on my backside as several collector plates toppled off their easels behind the glass doors, taking other precious pieces with them on the way to the bottom shelf. One of them was Mom's latest find, a rare porcelain plate from Russia. The one she wanted to show off on Saturday at her big party.

Mom had been planning this party for weeks. She had invited several big corporate clients – one of whom had a wife who collected rare expensive porcelain!

I think she bought that plate just to impress her. I knew I was dead!

Frantically I cleaned up and replaced what I could. Sam laid on the Oriental rug with his paws over his nose, covering one eye. He knew we were both dead.

I took inventory – two broken plates and one cup – not as bad as I thought. But could they be replaced? And could I replace them before the party? Even Dad might not be able to save me this time.

I had to do something. I wrote down the information from the broken plates I had pieced together and looked for some Super Glue.

Then I called Aunt Susan.

Susan was Mom's older sister. She was in her thirties and single. She was fun and since she didn't have any kids of her own, she'd kind of adopted me.

I liked Susan. She thought Mom was "too intense!" Mom and Susan had inherited their parents' fortune but both wanted to make their own way in the world.

John & Marlene Carson

Susan was a world traveler. She had been her Dad's favorite and followed him in the shipping industry. She was a tomboy, the son they never had. Mom was always jealous of her. She had to "outdo" her. Because of their rivalry, Grandpa sold the business, leaving Susan as a life-long consultant with pay, as well as the family fortune she split with Mom. Mom wanted nothing to do with the business and went out on her own. She left Connecticut after college and came to Minneapolis.

There I go ramblin' again! Anyway, back to our story...

Susan said she would come over this evening and keep Mom occupied and away from the china cabinet. I went to my computer and started searching. That's when I met Zip.

The computer was personalized just the way I liked it. The Horror theme popped up and I smiled when I heard the old sound clip saying "It's Alive! It's Alive!" My parents had the family filter on and all kinds of security built in and God knows who was watching us! They also expected their little girl to have the Peanuts or Cathy theme. So it was only natural to run the horror theme.

My plan was to go to my usual search engine and find out about Russian porcelain. From there I could see a list of manufacturers and get in touch with one of them to find a replacement plate. Then, with Susan's help, we could arrange an overnight express to put the new plate in before Mom ever knew what had happened. It would have worked great - except for Dad.

Dad was always doing something with our computers. "Security, you know! Top secret!" and "We are not just average citizens!" How many times would I hear him say that in my lifetime? I think he liked to spy on me and see if

The Porcelain Mines in Russia

any boys were talking to me. Protect his little girl, you know. Oh no! Now I'm talking like him! Sheesh!

This time I noticed the shortcut to the search engine was missing. In its place was something called 'SAFE SEARCH'.

"Safe search? What the heck is that? I suppose Dad is trying to protect me from the Internet again!" I said out loud, though it gave me a good feeling to know that he cared.

I didn't have time to wonder about it so I clicked on it. Then I really got a surprise.

The monitor screen went blank. I was afraid the computer had crashed and I was about to say some ungirl like things when I noticed static-like noise in my right ear. I turned my head and about fell out of the padded swivel chair. Materializing next to me was a man! It was like the transporter beams on the old Star Trek TV show. Only this wasn't Captain Kirk! He looked like a ghost! I could almost see through him.

"Who and what are you? How did you get here...?" I asked.

"I am Zip. It's an acronym for Zonal Information Program. I am a search engine."

"Not like any search engine I've ever seen! And I've never seen one outside of my computer. How can you do that?"

"I am a hologram. I have many files on you and know your preferences and all your search history. I am the result of a joint program developed by your government and mine."

"Who is *your* government?" I was careful now, being the daughter of a secret government agent. "And how did you get into or out of my computer? I don't have access to my Dad's computer or passwords."

John & Marlene Carson

The ghostly hologram responded. “My government is from far away. We are the Del-Tones, and have been operating from Area 51 in cooperation with your government. Your father works with us. But that is a story for another time. Your time on your current project is short. We are aware of your crisis, and are here to help. The party your mother is planning is very important to world affairs, and we are interested in the results. There is much at stake. However, we are limited to Zip as a contact device. We must also have your word on secrecy in order not to jeopardize you or your family as well as our joint program.”

“Wow, you ramble as much as I do! This is too intense!”

“To repeat,” It said. “I am personalized to you, and so will have many of the same attributes...” I stopped him. “Can you really take any form?” I asked, thinking of my neighbor Steve. He was the fourteen-year-old son of the people at the end of our block and I had a crush on him.

“What form would you like?” Zip asked.

I resisted temptation, and forced my mind back on the original reason for this highly unusual search.

“Are there really porcelain mines in Russia?” I asked.